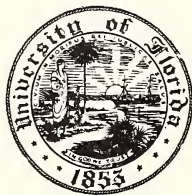


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TOO HOT TO HANDLE

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A MARSHAL PEDLEY NOVEL

by Stewart Sterling



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For Lurline and George
of the Waterway days

HP for Cugy Lurline

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solar memory

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TOO HOT TO HANDLE

ONE

The red car streaked up the avenue, its Mars light flashing balefully at oncoming trucks, its bell scattering late-prowling taxis like leaves in the September gale.

The man at the wheel was haggard, his smoke-reddened eyes shadowed with fatigue, slashes of weariness bracketing his lips. His face was sprinkled with the angry freckles of spark burns. One crimson welt, the shape and size of a lipstick kiss-mark, glistened at the angle of his jaw where flame had licked at him within the hour.

But evidently the punishment he had taken while investigating the warehouse conflagration downtown had already been dismissed from his mind; he was now gravely intent on the significance of the sky ahead.

A mile to the north the pinkish loom of Manhattan's nightly neons was smeared with sooty orange, the reflection of flames against an overlayer of billowing smoke. A leaning tower of black thrusting above the pall told him of a collapsed roof, sending up a spout of volcanic gases. That bright disk of white moving across the underside of the smoke cloud meant that the searchlight company had been called into action, which indicated a third alarm, possibly a fourth. And no wonder, he thought.

Chief Fire Marshal Benjamin Pedley knew the section of the city up ahead as well as he knew the details of the High Hazard map on the wall of his office at the Bureau of Fire Investigation. He had worried about it after block-by-block

inspections, had sweated about it through dozens of night alarms when he was unable to get to the fire scene. It was this familiarity which had made him leave the scene of the warehouse blaze downtown so abruptly.

Little Italy. Blocks of old-law tenements. Enough people to populate a small town crammed into one block-long fire-trap. Old folks, some of them ill or crippled. Children, always the helpless children. . . .

Tinder-dry woodwork and crumbling plaster concealed by a veneer of shabby brick or brownstone. Narrow stairs. Doorways blocked by baby buggies and tricycles. Antique fire escapes. Outlawed half-attics full of forbidden trash on which flames might spread from building to building with the speed of a string of exploding firecrackers.

It had happened before with tragic results; apparently it was happening again. The bloodshot eyes of pumpers and ladder trucks were ringing an entire block east of Third Avenue; a dozen streams lanced up into the dark from deck pipes and water tower.

He bounced his car over a tangle of hose, rode the curb, slewed around a chemical truck, slammed on the brakes in time to stop short of the rear bumper of a police emergency truck.

Smoke, swirling down in wild gusts from the rooftops, dropped a veil over ladders slanting against the tenements on the north side of the street. Spray, from hose lines trailing up the ladders, made a claret fog in the glare of the pumpers' headlights.

Rubber-clad men splashed through puddles carrying axes and ceiling hooks, lugged hose into doorways hazy with fumes, moved behind glassless windows on the upper floors by the fitful illumination of flashlights. Behind a fire line, at the far end of the block, patrolmen shepherded a crowd huddling in the sharp September northwester with only the

meager protection of bathrobes and blankets over their nightwear. The tenants watched the destruction of their homes in stunned silence.

With gas mask and battery lantern, Pedley stepped out into a miniature geyser of coupling spray.

The driver of the Emergency recognized him. "Flash burner, Marshal. Went up like a barrel full of matches."

"Everybody out?"

"What they say."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Only one I heard about was the old biddy who started this bonfire by smokin' in bed."

"At four in the morning? What was she—a cleaning woman just home from mopping up some office building downtown?"

"What I hear, she was too old for a scrubwoman's job."

The driver pointed. "They been using a fog nozzle in her room to cool it down so they can bring her out. Looks like they got her now."

Over the crackle of the flames, above the rumble of the pumpers and the roaring of the deck pipes, came a wild keening from the crowd. Two heads had appeared in the window at which the driver had pointed.

The beam of a searchlight, angling up from the street, threw the latticed shadow of an extension ladder against the front of the tenement. The tip of the ladder rested against the sill; on the third rung from the top a rubber-booted fireman braced himself. In the window beyond, beneath dripping helmets, the two heads were those of creatures in a space-world fantasy, faceless behind gas masks.

A bulk wrapped in dirty tarpaulin showed at the sill. The shrilling of the crowd dropped to a groan as the charred stumps of bare feet became visible, sticking out from beneath the canvas.

The body was hoisted across the sill, was gripped by the man on the ladder. He began to back down cautiously, rung by rung. The two heads vanished.

Pedley splashed toward the foot of the ladder. A burly individual in a white helmet greeted him brusquely.

"Late for the party, Ben. Fireworks pretty near over."

"Glad to hear it, Mac." Pedley noted that Battalion Chief MacKinnon's ordinarily ruddy complexion had been scorched to the color of a ripe tomato; his old friend was not a man who battled a blaze from the safety of the street. "All under control now?"

"If the wind doesn't shift." MacKinnon helped to take the body from the man on the ladder, gently lowered it to the sidewalk. "If none of those embers get away from the boys on the roofs in the next block. Lot of if's."

"I'll add one." Pedley squatted beside the corpse. "Know if the fire was set?" He unrolled enough of the canvas to expose the burned body. The mass of char told nothing of the dead woman's appearance save that she had been short and fat.

"Sure it was set." The Battalion Chief looked, swallowed hard, looked away; even thirty years in the Department didn't harden a man against a sight like that. "She set it by falling asleep when she was smoking. Tenants say the blaze started in her bedroom. My boys found the mattress a featherbed of ashes. Maybe I shouldn't say she fell asleep. Maybe she had a heart attack."

"Sounds more like insomnia than a coronary, Mac." The Marshal examined an irregular crescent of ugly, reddish-black sores on the fleshy upper arm of the dead woman. "Kind of elderly Italian women who live in this section aren't usually the cigarette-in-bed type; not many of them smoke at all. Few of 'em up at four in morning, either. What you make of these burn sores?"

"Where she rolled over on the mattress." MacKinnon was gruff. "Seen marks like that, many's the time, on drunks who cremated themselves."

"Have you so." Pedley didn't make it a question. The only time he had ever seen any sores like those on a corpse had been on one of Dutch Schultz's alky runners after the Brooklyn mob had amused themselves by seeing how long he could stand the red-hot tip of a cigar pressed against certain tender parts.

"You don't have to find a firebug *every* time the rigs roll. This wasn't arson, it was accident."

"Looks like it." Maybe, the Marshal thought, it was meant to look that way. "Who turned in the alarm?"

"Some dame phoned, Communications said. Phoned from a pay booth."

"With stores and bars all closed? With no street booths in this neighborhood?" Pedley brushed the fuzzy ash of the woman's nightgown from his fingers. "And with a fire alarm box right there on the corner, a hundred feet away? They get her name?"

"No. Communications claimed she was panicky. Hung up fast, after giving the address. Nothing unusual about that."

"Any of the tenants recall her?"

"Godsake, Ben. We haven't had time to interview everyone in the neighborhood. We been busy hooking up hydrants, getting up gauge pressures, hunting through closets for frightened kids. All I can tell you is, this Mamma Carlotta—that's what everyone calls her—lived alone in that two-room apartment on the third floor—"

He broke off; a booming like the muffled thumping of a big bass drum was the prelude to a huge cauliflower of bilious-yellow smoke blossoming from the street entrance of 549.

MacKinnon ran, barked orders. Two hosemen rushed a short length toward the doorway. Before they could reach it, a tall fireman lurched through the roiling fumes, a human burden over his shoulder.

The nozzle-men hurried to take the limp figure from him, plodded off toward the Department ambulance down the block. The tall fireman reeled to the curb, sat down, put his head between his knees, retching.

MacKinnon put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Where'd that back flash catch you, Larry?"

"On the stairs." The fireman didn't look up. "It . . . it blasted Pete . . . down the full flight. I landed on him . . . at the bottom." His helmet toppled to the pavement; he didn't seem to notice. "Broke his neck." He was sick again.

"Pete?" the Marshal asked. "Was that Pete Arnette?"

MacKinnon growled: "Yeah—one damn good man."

"The best," Pedley agreed, grimly. "He was a probationer on Sixteen Truck when I was tillerman." He had lost track of the rookie who had been the go-fer at the firehouse in those days; the blueshirt who was told a dozen times a day to "go fer" sandwiches, Cokes.

The Battalion Chief smeared a hand over his face. "You got him out, Larry. All you could do. One of those things. Always takes the best—" He stared stonily at a youth who came pelting down the street at a dead run.

A teen-ager, stumbling over hose lines, sloshing in the gutters, flailing his arms to keep his balance. But for a black turtle-neck sweater, motorcycle breeches and paratrooper boots he might have been mistaken for a girl; he was slight of build and delicate of feature; his enormous dark eyes and long lashes were distinctly feminine. He was hatless; as he ran, a forelock of greasy hair flopped back and forth across his face like the finger of a metronome.

Pedley held out an arm to block him off. "Where you think you're going, buster?"

The youth dodged, ducked beneath the ladder, plunged into the smoke-wreathed doorway of 549.

The Marshal sprang after him, overtook him, caught him by the shoulder on the fourth step. "Nobody allowed upstairs."

The boy glowered, appraising Pedley's beat-up hat, rumpled gray suit, smudged shirt. "Take your claws off me, man. You want to lose a faceful of teeth?"

Pedley hauled him down to the first-floor landing, kept him off balance, backed him against a charred joist. "You want to cremate yourself, son? It's not safe up there."

"You're no cop! What right—?"

"I'm a fireman."

"Yeah? Then leggo, smoke-eater!" The youth jabbed forked fingers at the Marshal's eyes.

Pedley slammed him against the wall, hard enough to dislodge a chunk of wet plaster; it dropped on the teenager's head, dazed him so he fell to the floor.

"You live upstairs?" Pedley bent over, got a grip on the forelock.

"No." Dark eyes glared venomously. "My grandmother does. Did."

"The old lady who burned to death? Mamma Carlotta? Is that right?"

"What's it to you?"

"Why, you didn't act as if you were much concerned about her. You ran right past her body. Didn't even stop to look at her. What's so important upstairs that you have to risk spark holes in that fancy sweater to get up there?"

"Hell with you!"

"All right. No back cracking. What name do we book you under?"

"Rik."

"Rik what?"

"Stavro. Richard Stavro, you son of a bitch!"

Pedley yanked on the hair. The teen-ager came to his feet clawing and spitting like a cat. Pedley slapped him in the mouth. "What's in the old lady's apartment that you want to get to before anyone else does?"

A thread of blood trickled from the boy's lips but he made no reply.

"What would you be looking for? A roll of bills stashed in Gran'ma's sugar bowl?" Pedley got a wristlock on the boy, marched him to the street. "Or her jewelry?"

"She didn't have enough cash to pay off a parking meter," Rik sneered. "All the jewelry she owned was one lousy wedding ring." He glanced down curiously at the charred feet projecting from the tarpaulin but made no move to halt beside the body. "Anyhow, she left everything that was worth anything to her only grandchild, that's me. All she had was that TV set my old man gave her; I wanted to get it before some of you brave fire laddies snuk it off to your bunkhouse."

"Lay off the smart-jack answers, kid." Pedley pushed him along the sidewalk with a succession of shoves, punctuating them with questions. "Who told you there was a fire in her place? How you happen to be roaming around this time of night? Where you live? And how did you manage to get here so fast, from wherever that is?"

The boy peered out of the corners of his eyes. "What you trying to do, man? Put a frame around my picture?"

T W O

Pedley marched him to the red car. "Clasp your hands behind your neck. Keep 'em there. Now, what would I want to frame you for . . . a firebug job?"

"Fine, fat chance! *Keep outa my pockets*, you big slob!"

"See what you carry around with you." The Marshal deposited a curious collection on the hood of the car.

Cigarettes, handkerchief smeared with hair oil, yellow sock wadded into a ball, pencil-flashlight, key ring with two blank pin-tumbler keys, a silver lighter made in the shape of a nude woman, a pocket tool kit fitted into the hollow of a metal handle, ballpoint pen, a German switchblade knife, sixty-four cents in change, an expensive alligator-leather wallet.

The wallet held twenty-one dollars in bills, three cards in plastic enclosures and several snapshots of girls, in shorts, in Bikinis. One card read: *Richard Antonio Stavro, Apt. 16B. Varamista Towers, Central Park West, New York, N.Y. In case of accident, notify Mrs. Alex Stavro—RH 8-6742.*

"Think of that!" Pedley showed astonishment. "Your folks live in that tony co-op with the thirty-story campanile, while your gran'ma had to make do with a cold-water walkup?"

The teen-ager was surly. "I don't live with my folks; I live with my mom. She doesn't get along with Mamma Carlotta. Old lady's my pop's mother."

"Father dead?"

"No."

"Where's *he* live?"

"I don't know anything about my father." Rik raised his voice. "He and Mom split up. Mamma Carlotta blames Mom for the bustup, that's why Grandmother wouldn't take anything off us." The enormous liquid eyes appraised the Marshal cunningly. "I come from one of those crazy, broken homes you hear about, man. Childhood insecurity, that's my middle name. So you see I'm not responsible for any do-dah-delinquency."

"You'll find out how responsible you are, if you had anything to do with touching off this fire."

"I was five miles away when it started; I can prove it."

"Then how'd you get here so fast?"

"Bike."

"Riding your bike around town, middle of the night?" The Marshal was skeptical.

"Ah, don't be a wisehead. I only rode over from home, across the park."

"How come you happened to be up, that hour?"

"Do I look like a panty-waist who has to be in bed by ten? I'll be twenty next month."

"Never mind how old you are. I asked what you were doing."

"Comin' home from Coney. When I came up out of the subway at Seventy-second, the newsie was gawkin' at the sky all lighted up across town. So natch I thought it might be—" Rik hesitated, then finished—"a doozie of a barbecue. I went home, got my bike, rode over here."

"You have your answers all set, haven't you?" Pedley jingled the uncut keys on the ring. "What's the answer to these blanks? You figure to file them to fit some lock? With that rat-tail file in your tool kit?"

"Yah, that's my homework. That's equipment furnished with the correspondence course I'm taking." Rik batted the long eyelashes in mock embarrassment. "How to Be a Burglar in Twelve Easy Lessons."

"For a kid whose grandmother just burned to death, you're a real flip number, aren't you?" Pedley studied another of the cards behind a plastic window of the wallet.

This certifies that
RIK STAVRO
has completed the full course in
M-I-T-S-U-K-A-M-I J-U-D-O
and is entitled to the rating of
Expert
signed
Hato Mitsukami

"Do all right in your correspondence courses, don't you?" Pedley tossed the wallet on the hood, unrolled the sock, felt the grains of sand in the toe. "What's the matter—aren't you sure enough of your jujitsu to take care of yourself in a brawl? You have to tote this sap around, too?"

"Sap, my eye. That's just one of my socks. I got sand in it at Coney."

"Bet you did. Filled with sand, it makes a good blackjack. Boys at the precinct would be likely to call this sock a concealed weapon." Pedley put knife and sock in his coat pocket along with the blank keys. "Put the rest of that stuff back in your pants." He opened the car door, took handcuffs from the glove compartment. "Snap it up."

"Go ahead, jug me." Rik snatched his possessions from the hood. "Since when has it been a crime to chase after fire engines! That's all I've done. You got rocks in your skull if you think I set this fire!"

"Put out your wrists. Don't give me any more trouble."

Pedley clicked the cuff locks. "Get in the back seat. Stay put until I get back. You're under arrest, don't forget it."

"You can't arrest anybody, you dumb crumb." The youth got in the back seat, clumsily. "You're no cop, you're just a fatheaded fireman."

The Marshal didn't bother to answer; he plashed back to 549. The belching volcano next door had been throttled down by streams from deck pipes and water tower to boiling clouds of steam, churning brightly in the searchlight's beams. The old woman's body had been taken to the ambulance. The smoke-sick ladderman sat on the running board of 58 Truck, eyes closed, head back, gulping in fresh air.

MacKinnon intercepted the Marshal before he reached the foot of the ladder slanting up to the third-floor window.

"Too late, Ben. Can't risk it now. That whole east wall's ready to collapse."

"I have to take a look." Pedley put a hand on the ladder, a foot on the lowest rung.

"Tell you, no dice. Floor beams are gone. I've pulled Fifty-eight's men out of there. We're unladdering."

"Leave this one. Only be a couple minutes."

"Two too many, you ask me."

"Job to do, Mac." Pedley went up swiftly, paused at the sill to adjust his mask, felt tremors in the brickwork as he put a leg in the window.

The pulsing of the motors and the sound of the streams were muffled as he felt his way into the room, stamping carefully ahead before taking each step. The air was thick with smoke and steam but the heat on his ears and hands was bearable.

Something glittered in the wedge of light from his battery lantern: the brass knob of a bedstead. Beyond, a rectangle of sodden black was checkerboarded with what

seemed to be burnt string. The old woman had slept on a mattress supported by an old-fashioned bedspring; the red-hot wires had cut through the ashes of the mattress, making the checkerboard pattern.

The plaster on the walls had cracked but had not crumbled; the wallpaper was scorched and scabrous but its rambler-rose pattern still showed through the brown. That charred wreckage that might have been a packing case would have been a bureau; shards of mirror glass glinted as he tested the soggy planking on his way across to the door.

In the middle of the floor he stood still, sniffing like a bird dog in brushwood. There was no trace of kerosene or gasoline odor. There was no stove in the room. He went down on one knee to paw through the glass. It was all slivers from the mirror; no thick pieces such as might have been part of a shattered ash tray.

He stood up, moved on cautiously. Apparently the neighbors had been right in claiming the fire had started in the bedroom; at the beginning of the blaze the temperatures would not have been high enough to bake the plaster from the laths. But as flames spread, the pent-up gases had become hotter . . . as was evident from the charred woodwork out in the kitchen.

Bedroom, kitchen, bath . . . that was all. She must have used the kitchen as a living room, he realized.

There was a gaping hole in the kitchen floor; the gas stove and the sink had slid through to the floor below. The refrigerator was there, with the door yawning wide over a welter of smashed china, broken glasses, something that must have been a pot roast. On the shelf, beyond the hole in the floor, beneath the blackened skeleton of a kitchen cabinet, was a telephone that might have been designed by Dali, melted into a drooping blob.

He turned back to the bathroom. Sooty porcelain fixtures, tortured metal piping, piles of blackened plaster, the reek of burnt rubber from a perforated bathmat, a mirrored medicine cabinet which had fallen into the wash basin. In the wall, where the cabinet had been, a curious rectangle, chipped out of the plaster, making a recess behind the back of the cabinet where it had been screwed to the studding. The shallow recess, about sixteen inches from top to bottom, was perhaps fourteen inches wide.

He took off his coat, wrapped the cabinet in it, tucked it under his arm, backed into the bedroom.

The floor heaved beneath him, like one of those trick arrangements in a Fun House at an amusement park.

The floor sagged, gave way like wet cardboard.

THREE

He clung to the cabinet, caught at a smoldering beam. It swung down as if hinged to the rear wall. Nails gouged his palm as crumbling wood gave way beneath his grip.

Planking cracked beneath the force of his fall; his right leg crashed through the floor as if through thin ice. He swung the cabinet overhead to deflect the debris crashing down on him from the third floor—the bedframe, a bureau drawer showering embers, a small avalanche of feathery black ashes from the clothing in the closet.

He had dropped the lantern. The air was thick with plaster dust, yet he could see a little by the light of small flames, like luminous lizards, running across the floor, licking at his hands. The roar of brick being ground to powder in the wall told him he no longer had any margin of safety.

He braced his left knee on spongy planking, pulled the other leg free. A splinter from broken planking slashed at the inside of his thigh. Bits of mortar exploding from the wall stung his face like sparks as he crawled to the street window, dragging the cabinet. He had an elbow hooked over the sill when the floor dropped away beneath him.

There was a short ladder at the window but, by the way the sill shivered beneath his weight, there wouldn't be time to climb down it. He swung a leg up and over; the wall crumbled like a sand castle in surf as he gripped the ladder rail.

He slid down like a boy riding a banister; the wall dissolved with a thunderous roar.

Firemen ran to him; three men with press cards in their hats closed in on him.

"Firebug job here, Marshal?"

"Who is your prisoner?"

"Carrying your own first-aid kit?"

The *City News* man, an old friend of the Marshal, pointed at Pedley's right shoe. It glistened like wet red rubber; a stain oozed over the pavement.

Pedley nodded calmly. "Have to see Doc about that, I guess. Nothing much to tell you, anyway. You won't go wrong if you suggest that someone was smoking in bed. Let you know the details later." He made an effort not to limp as he moved off toward the Department's ambulance.

The newsmen refused to be shaken off.

"Who's the beatnik cuffed in your car?"

"Get a confession from him?"

Pedley cut them short. "I put the kid under arrest to keep him from scooting in the house to see if his grandmother was all right. Lay off, now."

MacKinnon hurried to intercept him. "Get the hell out of here, boys. You're hampering operations." To the Marshal he muttered, "You're hurt bad, Ben!"

Pedley answered evenly, "An act, to keep those newsmen out of my hair."

"Damn fine acting. You're spilling gore like a stuck pig."

"I'm all right, Mac. Ask one of your men to discourage those legmen from pumping the prisoner in my car, will you?"

"Sure. Who is he?"

"Mamma Carlotta's grandson."

"Ah, you don't have to put the pinch on a kid just because he wants to see what happened to his home."

"He didn't live here, Mac. He just 'happened' to be up

and dressed and where he could see the blaze—at four A.M.!”

MacKinnon eyed the medicine cabinet. “Still hellbent on putting this on Queer Street, aren’t you?”

“Some queer things about it.” Pedley didn’t pursue the point; they had reached the ambulance.

The surgeon pushed his Chief’s helmet back off his forehead. “What’d you do this time, Ben?” His mouth tightened with disapproval. “Wrestle with some busted window glass?”

“Sliver of wood.” Pedley indicated the tear in his trousers.

“Yes. I know you. You think it’s a trifling scratch. Well. Get in there.” The surgeon pointed to the floor of the hospital car. “Unless you want to take off your pants out here in the street.”

“Not a major operation, Doc.”

“Hurt?”

“Some. Yair. *Hey! That* hurt.”

The surgeon held up a jagged sliver of wood the length of a darning needle. “Missed an artery by a millimeter. Have to stitch you up.” He used scissors and swab.

MacKinnon growled, “He must have lost a gallon of blood. He ought to take it easy, Doc.”

Pedley retorted mildly, “I can still lug a roll of hose up three flights of stairs faster than you can, Mac. You stick to your knitting. Let Doc take care of his.”

MacKinnon clumped away, grumbling. The surgeon shook his head. “Trouble is, he’s right, Ben. You may not realize it, but you’re close to exhaustion right this minute. You couldn’t carry a box of crackers up a steep grade without—”

“Get on with your stitch in time,” Pedley interrupted

dourly. "If you're throwing in a sermon free, maybe I'd better have more than a local anesthetic."

"You've already inhaled enough nitrous fumes to knock out most of MacKinnon's boys. What you trying to prove—that you can take more punishment than any man in the Department?"

"That an old lady was tortured, Doc."

"Um . . ." the surgeon scowled. "I only made a superficial examination of the body, but I wondered about those burns on her arm."

"Could the shock of a thing like that kill an old lady in reasonably good health?"

"Yes, oh, certainly. I would testify to such a probability." The surgeon snipped off the end of the tape bandage. "You think she was so murdered?"

"Looks that way."

"Then—" the surgeon's gesture took in the vast expanse of wreckage up and down the block—"this was started to cover up the crime?"

"Or maybe out of sheer rage and disappointment." Pedley pulled his trousers on. "That's a privileged statement, made by the patient to his doctor in confidence."

The surgeon nodded. "Rat who would treat an old woman like that wouldn't mind burning down a block full of children and old folks, would he? Or getting a fireman killed, in the bargain. I can understand why you want to stay on this while the scent is hot. All the same, you've taken too much smoke. You ought to have treatment for those burns. And you're soaked to the skin; in your present condition, a walking invitation to pneumococcus—"

"Also," Pedley agreed dourly, "I need a shave and a bath and a breakfast. All of which I'll get in proper sequence." He held out his hand. "I'll show up at your office

in a couple days to have you remove the signs of your handiwork. Meantime, obliged."

"Before then they'll probably be pumping you full of penicillin. But at that—" the surgeon reached into his little black bag—"I appreciate how you feel about Arnette. If you absolutely have to have something to keep you going, one of these might help." He handed over a plastic phial.

"That's *my* kind of sermon, Doc. Thanks." The Marshal carried the coat-wrapped cabinet back up the street, found one of MacKinnon's enginemen standing guard over the red sedan. The newsmen were at the other end of the block, near the firelines, interviewing tenants.

Rik Stavro sat hunched over, manacled hands squeezed between his knees, as if to hide the handcuffs from his own vision. "Like crazy, man!" He made a show of being awed. "Behold the Department's Seeing Eye dog! Goes in my grandmother's apartment and all he can find to rescue is a beat-up ol' medicine cabinet. Sensooshenal!"

The fireman opened the car door for the Marshal. "He offered me a five-spot to call a Mr. Pendiff at Chelsea two-one-seven-six-nine, tell him he was being taken to police headquarters to be third-degreed."

"Thanks, fella." Pedley closed the door, got the motor going. "I'll remember to ask MacKinnon to give you an extra Saturday-night leave." Over his shoulder he added, "Give him the five, Rik; I don't mind his calling your lawyer for you."

Rik snarled, "Your brains may be scrambled but mine aren't. I was just tryin' to see if he'd go for a bribe. He wanted ten to put in the call; I gave him the big laugh. He's as crooked as you are, big shot."

Pedley shrugged. "Has a hate on the whole Department, hasn't he?" He waved to the fireman, slid the car off the curb, across the tangle of loose lines, out to the corner.

As he headed downtown, one of the aerial ladder trucks from the Bronx clanged slowly past, going north. The fire must be under control or MacKinnon wouldn't have let that apparatus return to its station.

He switched on the two-way set, called the dispatcher, was plugged through to his office. "Barney? You get hold of Shaner?"

The voice of Barney Malloy, the Bureau's night owl, came through the speaker with metallic overtones: "Yeah, Skipper, he called in, half hour ago. Know where the goat was?"

"I don't give a damn where he was; I want him at the office. I'm on my way back, now."

"Don't fret up a sweat, Skipper; he'll be here. He was up at Danceland with a lady wrestler, teachin' her the cha-cha. Was there anything for us in that three-bagger up there?"

"Yair. Don't know exactly what it is, Barney. But I'm bringing it in. At least, what was left of it. Someone beat me to it; took a packet of valuables after torturing an old woman—"

Behind him, Rik whimpered like a whipped puppy. "You took it, you stole it yourself. You rotten, thieving bastard!"

Pedley said, "All for now, Barney. Problem child on my hands, here. Over and out." He was leaning forward to switch off the set when his ear was seized between savage teeth.

He brought his forearm up, punched backward over his shoulder.

Rik muttered obscenities, stood up, lunged forward, grabbed with linked hands over Pedley's head for the wheel.

Pedley braked hard, but the youth's wrists came down

over his eyes. The car swerved sharply to the left. A truck horn blasted startled warning. The squeal of the brakes was topped by the screech of tearing metal.

The crash hurled Pedley face-on into the windshield; only the fact that Rik's forearms cushioned the shock saved him; as it was, the collision stunned him.

The car slewed in a half circle, came to rest parallel to the truck, heading the same way.

The truck driver sprang from his cab, cursing. A whistle shrilled, down the avenue.

The right-hand rear door of the Marshal's car had burst open under the impact. And Rik had vanished.

FOUR

The truck driver's head appeared at the car window. "Lemme help you out, Chief—Godsake, you got blood all over you!"

"Not mine. Nothing to get excited about." The rear-view mirror showed that the gore on the Marshal's forehead wasn't from a cut on his own face. It must have come from Rik's hands when the handcuffs hit the windshield. "Which way did the kid go?"

"I wasn't noticing, Chief. I thought you'd be killed. I did my best to swerve over." The truckman squinted in alarm at Pedley's soot-smudged, burn-marked face. "Was you and him battlin' just before you swerved into me?"

"He made a grab at the wheel. My own dumb fault. I should have known he didn't have any more sense." Pedley surveyed the star-shattered windshield, broken headlamp, bashed-in fender.

A patrolman ran up, red faced, panting. "You all right, Mr. Pedley?"

The Marshal nodded. "Car took the beating. What I get for being careless with a prisoner."

The patrolman jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Was that him? I see him scoot off, all doubled over, holding his belly like he'd had a kick in the crotch."

"He may have cut his wrists a bit." Pedley inspected the leaking radiator. "But he was probably holding his hands under his sweater to hide the handcuffs."

"What is he? A firebug?" asked the truckman.

"Just a kookie kid I was taking downtown to question." Pedley made sure the medicine cabinet was still intact.

The patrolman whipped out his complaint book. "He can't get far, wearing those couplings. Still, I better have a descrip."

"He may not be easy to round up," Pedley answered. "But you won't have any trouble recognizing him; he's one of these off-beatnik types. Name of Stavro, that's V—R—O; Rik for Richard, Stavro. Five-ten. One-sixty. Twenty. Skinny. Black hair, wears it long. Black eyes, girl's long lashes. Thin face. Sharp nose. Full lips. Bat ears. No hat or cap. Black sweater, ditto motorcycle breeches." Pedley climbed back in his car. "I'll put the pickup through regular channels; just notify my office if you get hold of him."

The truckman protested. "Better not try to drive that wreck. I'll run you anywheres . . ."

"Thanks. But I think she'll hold together for a couple of miles." Pedley backed off, flipped up a hand in farewell, heading westward.

The car handled like a jeep in deep muck. His Mars light was out of commission. The bell didn't work. The short-wave was dead. The water-temperature indicator stuck at H. *We're both a little used*, he told himself.

He tried to figure what Rik would do. The kid couldn't ride his bike, even if he could get back uptown to it. He wouldn't risk hailing a cab. But he'd be frantic to get free from those handcuffs. Chances were he'd head for Central Park, skulking in the shadow of the buildings as long as no one was in sight on the street, hiding in some dark doorway if car headlights swept the sidewalks. Once in the park, he would keep off the drives and paths, sneak along, sheltered by the shrubbery.

But he would know the Varamista would be watched.

So he'd probably try to make the home of some school friend who lived nearby. Or maybe a garage where a friendly mechanic could be talked into using a hacksaw on the bracelets. Wherever he went, he would, likely enough, try to phone his mother, if only because he wouldn't want her to upset his alibi.

The lofty spire atop the Varamista was touched with pink by the dawn as Pedley maneuvered carefully through the Seventy-second Street crossover and turned up Central Park West, to the firehouse of Ladder 58 on West Seventy-seventh. Pete Arnette's company.

The open doors to the apparatus floor, the brass pole with its rubber landing mat, the tabby asleep under the watch desk, all carried him back to that time when old Truck Nine had rolled in after eleven solid hours of fighting a tar-and-turpentine holocaust on South Street. Pete had been entitled to a seventy-two-hour leave, then. But he hadn't gone for the bunk, like the rest of them. Every other man jack in the company, including the tillerman, one B. Pedley, had been whipped down to a nubbin. They had all hit the hay, exhausted. Not Pete.

It had been about this same time in the morning, a Saturday morning in late summer too. Iron Man Pete had showered and dressed and started off for the Staten Island ferry. His girl lived on Staten Island; he was going to take her on a picnic somewhere on the Jersey side. That would be the girl who was now the mother of Pete's three youngsters.

He carried the medicine cabinet to the watch desk, used the phone there.

"Barney?"

"Thought you were coming in."

"Slight mishap. Car's on the disabled list."

"Two-way on the fritz, too? Where you calling from?"

"Ladder Fifty-eight. Ed there?"

"Wolfing my hamburger, right here at my elbow. Put him on?"

"Wait a sec. Chore for you. Root around, see what you can dig up on an old lady, Carlotta Stavro. Got it?"

"S—T—A—V—R—O?"

"That's it. She was cindered in her bed up there in Little Italy. But there'll be some background to it. Get Russ Drake on it; have him hop up there to One Hundred and Fifth, ask around. Want to know her family connections particularly. Dig deep, boy; there'll be something. Put Ed on."

"Hi, coach. What's the score?"

"We've been taking a beating."

"One of those things?"

"With complications, as the medics say. Know where the Varamista is?"

"Deed ah do. Used to go out with a babe who—"

"Spare me the long-play record. Jump up here to the Varamista, take over the switchboard."

"Pretty early in the morning to expect me to overhear any spicy conversations."

"Keep your eyes open, as well as your ears. That PBX is right beside the elevator, across from the stair well. You can spot anyone trying to sneak upstairs."

"Who, or whom, do I spot?"

"A tough juve who ran off with a pair of my stainless-steel bracelets. A switchblade snake." Pedley repeated the description he'd given the cop.

"And where will thee be, all this while?"

"Upstairs, with his mother. Any incoming calls for her, stall 'em and trace the call."

"Right you are and here go I, coach."

The Marshal took the medicine cabinet to the lavatory, set it beneath the wash basin. From his billfold he took a

small wax-paper envelope, extracted from it a sticker which he pasted on the top of the cabinet. DO NOT HANDLE! EXHIBIT . . . *Bureau of Fire Investigation.*

After he had cleaned up, he went out to the car and took a smoke-stained raincoat from the trunk compartment. It wasn't appropriate for the weather, but it concealed some of the damage to his clothing.

Nevertheless, when he strode into the lobby of the Varamista five minutes later, the night man at the switchboard stared at him suspiciously.

"Who you looking for, bud?" The night man was a beefy-shouldered specimen who would have looked more like a fullback than a switchboard operator, except for the pale pudginess of his face, and the heavy black-framed spectacles which gave him an oddly owlsh look for so large a man.

Pedley held his billfold open to the blue-and-gold badge. "Fire Department. Official business." He looked over the night man's shoulder at the typed names over the plug holes. The name over 16B was Tedder, not Stavro. "Let's go upstairs."

"Whaddya mean, let's go! Those are automatic elevators. Just push the button, mister. You don't need me. I'm staying here, where I belong."

"What's your name, friend?"

"Howland. And don't con me with that buddy-buddy line. I don't give a damn for that shiny badge. I'm working for the tenants, not the city."

"You're coming upstairs, Howland."

"Hell I am!" The big man came to his feet belligerently. He took off his glasses. "Who'll make me?"

"Upstairs with me or downtown to jail. Take your pick; take it quick."

"Jail? For what?" The heavy jaw took a pugnacious set.

"For not cooperating with a fire marshal when ordered to do so. Expect you never heard of the ordinance but there's a six-month penalty for refusing. I haven't time to horse around; you want to go up or down?"

"You're no detective. You got no authority to put the pinch on me." But Howland wavered. "What if a call comes through my board?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take the responsibility."

Howland hesitated, put on his glasses, muttered something unintelligible, led the way to the elevator. "What floor?"

"Sixteen. Seen the Stavro kid tonight?"

"Rikky? No. I only come on at midnight." Howland said nothing more until the car stopped at the sixteenth, then: "You got a warrant to serve? That kid in trouble again?"

"I'd say he is." Pedley touched the pearl button at 16B.

Chimes rang cheerfully.

There was a long wait. Howland shifted his feet uneasily. "Maybe Miss Tedder took a sleeping pill. You should have let me ring her first from the lobby. Tenants don't like people coming upstairs unannounced."

Pedley put his ear to the door, heard a low feminine voice. "Joe—*Joe!*" Then a click, as if a phone had been replaced on its cradle.

The chimes were ringing for the third time when a timid voice called from close inside the door. "Who's there?"

Pedley prodded the night man's shoulder with a forefinger.

Howland frowned but responded. "Fella from the Fire Department, Miss Tedder. It's about Rikky . . ."

The door opened a couple of inches; the safety chain clattered.

"Joe! *I tried to call you! What's the matter?!*" The

woman's voice was tight with terror. "Has something happened—?"

Pedley caught a glimpse of dark hair, frightened eyes. "Not to your son. But I have to ask you some questions about him."

"Joe," she said tensely. "You wait. Don't leave me with this man." The chain rattled again. The door opened. A light went on in a tiny foyer.

She clutched a blue peignoir at her throat. Long dark hair flowed down one shoulder nearly to her waist. Her eyes were like the boy's, large and long-lashed, bright with apprehension. She gazed somberly at the Marshal.

"You don't have to torture me, for God's sake. Just tell me what he's done this time."

FIVE

Pedley answered with a question: "Where was he last night?" as he followed her through the foyer into a small living room.

"He was going to Coney to see the fireworks." She pulled back heavy draperies. Bright sunlight accentuated her pal-lor, her lack of make-up and lipstick; it also let her see the burn marks on the Marshal's face. "You've been hurt!" Her forehead puckered with quick sympathy. "Were you in an accident? Was Rikky . . . ?"

"We were. I don't think he's been hurt much. So far." He decided that the tidy living room, with its blue-tiled fireplace and gleaming brass, its pastel slipcovers, its pleasantly woodsy water colors, its white baby grand, the silver bowl filled with yellow pompoms, the row of fashionable magazines on the coffee table in front of the sofa, was much more orderly than the home of a wild youth like Rik might have been expected to be.

"So far?" She stared at him in consternation while she fumbled blindly for a cigarette in the crystal box on the coffee table. "Are you trying to break bad news gently? Please don't; I'd rather have it straight out."

Pedley moved so he could get a glimpse through the door which stood open beyond the fireplace. "Whether he went to Coney, I don't know. But an hour or so ago he showed up at a fire across town. Fire that started in his grandmother's apartment."

"Oh, *no!*" The hand holding the cigarette trembled so she had difficulty lighting it.

Joe Howland spoke from the foyer. "If you're trying to say Rikky started a fire at his grandmother's, you're nuts! Kid thinks more of her than he does of . . . well, of pretty near anybody."

The woman said, "Hush, Joe," and, "But that's perfectly true." She drew a deep breath. "Was Mamma Carlotta . . . ?"

The Marshal nodded. "Burned to death in her bed." Through the door he could see a boudoir chair, a mirrored vanity, a bed which had evidently been slept in. "Your boy tried to get in her apartment after the fire. Apparently he meant to hunt around for something valuable in the ruins. Any idea what it might have been?"

"None at all. Mamma Carlotta didn't have any money, or anything else that was valuable." She shook her head. "Not of her own, at least."

Pedley strolled past the windows to the closed door on the opposite side of the living room. "Maybe something belonging to your husband, Mrs. Stavro?"

"Miss Tedder, if you please. And I know absolutely nothing about my ex-husband." She bit her lower lip; the muscles at the corners of her eyes began to twitch.

"You'd know—" Pedley opened the door casually—"if he happened to have a lot of money, wouldn't you?"

"I most certainly would *not*." She was resentful. "Even during the few years I was married to Alex, I never knew anything about where he got his money or how much he had."

"Is there anything mysterious about where Mr. Stavro gets his money?" He thought she was upset by his inspection of the boy's room, but admitted to himself that it would be only natural for her not to want anyone to see

that helter-skelter confusion. Clothing strewn on a bed that hadn't been slept in. A shirt wadded into a ball on the carpet beneath the bed. Records strewn about the carpet. A stack of magazines, a pile of comics spilling off a chair draped with a bath towel, some neckties, a pair of striped shorts.

"Nothing mysterious," she replied bitterly, "you couldn't find out all about if you went through police records."

He turned to glance at her; her face was flushed with shame or anger. "That's why you divorced him?"

"When I married him I supposed he was a gambler; that's what he told me. What I didn't find out until too long afterward was that he did his gambling with the law . . . and other people's money." Tears ran down her cheeks, but her voice was steady. "That's why I've fought so hard to keep Rikky from going wrong; he knows what his father is. If you think it's tough on a boy to realize that his father is a criminal, how do you think it feels to be that boy's mother when she knows that her son admires the man she couldn't bear to live with!" She went to the mantel, leaned her head against it as if for support. "That's what Joe meant; Rikky doesn't know where his father is so he goes to his grandmother's all the time so he can *talk* about Alex."

Pedley stepped inside the boy's room. The picture they were giving him of the affectionate grandson didn't check with the boy's indifference at the sight of the old lady's charred feet. "Kid's been in trouble a lot?"

"I guess you could find out all about that from the records, too, if you wanted to." She crossed the room, came into Rik's bedroom. "That doesn't give you the right to hound him for something he hasn't done. He wouldn't any more hurt Mamma Carlotta than—than cut off his own

right hand. Accusing him of a frightful thing like setting fire to her house!"

"So far," Pedley said in a matter-of-fact tone, "I haven't accused him of anything except escaping from an officer who arrested him." He surveyed the pin-up pictures tucked into the bureau mirror, the motorcycle helmet hung over one of the bedposts, the derringers and ancient revolvers decorating the walls. "But his grandmother wasn't the only fatality at that fire, Miss Tedder. A fireman was killed, a man I'd buddied with." He pulled open the top drawer of the bureau. "If the fire was set—and I'm reasonably sure it was—the person who set it is going to pay. If your son didn't do it, I want to know why he happened to be there, what he was after." In the bureau was a collection of test tubes, beakers, glass flasks, reagent bottles—stuff from an experimental chemistry set or possibly material taken from his high school lab. "We'll look up his record, all right. What'll we find?"

She sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed, holding her face in her hands. "Oh, God, I don't know how I can tell you."

"Any setting fire to schools . . . ?"

"No." She dropped her hands to her lap, kept her eyes on them; her voice was barely a whisper. "I've never been able . . ." she stopped, began again. "At first, it was just little things. Vandalism. Stealing from dime-store counters. Nothing seemed to stop him; I tried every imaginable punishment. They even sent him away for six months."

"For pilfering?"

"He got into a horrid scrape with a couple of his—his crowd—and one of the girls in school. She was only thirteen—"

Pedley closed the bureau drawer. "Incorrigible and proud

of it, yair. Sometimes a lad like that will straighten up and fly right."

"I've told myself that a thousand times. Only . . ."

A clock in the living room chimed six times. Instantly, as if on signal, the phone rang in the foyer.

Joe Howland exclaimed, "Who the hell is on my board!" He ran to answer. "Yuh . . . yuh . . . who're you? Oh, *yuh*? Okay, just a minute." He called: "For you, Mr. Pedley."

The big man handed the receiver to him with respect: "Some guy says he's one of your deputies."

Pedley said, "Something, Ed?"

Ed Shaner chuckled. "This dame is about to blow a gasket, coach. She's blasting my ear off right now, wants to know if I'm ringing the right apartment."

"Get to it, windy."

"Right. Call traced to Riverside seven-four-three-nine-three. Subscriber, Helen Stavro, two-nine-eight-one Riverside Drive. Wants to talk to Sixteen-B."

"Thirty seconds, Ed." He raised his voice. "Miss Tedder, phone." He spoke to the transmitter again. "Do your stuff."

She came flying. "Rikky?"

He held out the receiver, took Howland's arm, led him into the living room. "Remember any other calls to this apartment earlier this morning?"

The night man touched the fingers of his right hand to his temple. "Uh-uh. Nothing since I came on—midnight like I told you."

Behind them, in the foyer, Pedley could hear staccato answers from the woman. "No, I don't," "Yes, I will," "No, I haven't . . ." He pointed a thumb backward over his shoulder. "She in business?"

"You're damn right. Interior decorating. She's one of

the tops. Place on Fifty-sixth, rich-bitch customers, swanky stuff. You don't think she's livin' on alimony, do you? She don't get the first dirty dime from the kid's father."

Kay Tedder hung up. Her face was a mask of misery as she returned to the living room. "That," she said wretchedly, "was my sister-in-law. Rikky is at her place."

Pedley guessed. "She wanted to know if it was all right to give him some getaway money?"

She shook her head. "Helen didn't give him any money. She wanted to tell me that Rikky says he's going to leave home. He's threatened to do that before but this time Helen thinks he means it. He says he's going to go with his father; that his father is here in New York." She burst into unashamed tears. "That's what I get for twenty years of trying to bring him up to be a decent human being."

SIX

"Joe," Pedley said and took Kay Tedder's arm, "you can go downstairs now. But don't interfere with my deputy at the switchboard; that's an order."

The night man was reluctant. "If it's all right with you, Miss Tedder?"

"It doesn't make any difference, Joe." She made a palms-up gesture of despair. "Nothing makes any difference . . ."

Howland started to say something but changed his mind and went out, closing the hall door gently behind him.

The Marshal asked, "Would this sister-in-law know where your ex-husband is?"

"I expect so. Helen and Alex have always been . . . well, thicker than thieves." She freed herself from his grasp. "I have to make coffee before I faint."

The kitchen was tiny and tidy as a show-window display. While she filled the coffeepot she spoke as if talking to herself: "I suppose Helen could be called big-hearted but she's been a terribly bad influence on Rikky. When I'd try to discipline him, she'd make a fuss over him and give him extravagant presents so he never felt deprived of things I'd forbidden him."

"Did this big-hearted sister support her mother?"

"She and Alex did; Mamma Carlotta wouldn't take money from Alex because she thought it was dirty money, so he gave it to Helen instead. Of course Helen doesn't need it herself, she does all right."

"Does what?"

"She calls herself a chanteuse; I call her a high-grade B girl. She sings at some cocktail lounge; rolls one of those midget pianos around the floor, sings old favorites and new off-color songs, collects drinks and tips from the customers. Will you have a cup?"

"Sorry, I can't wait, but thanks anyhow." He turned at the kitchen door for a parting shot. "If you hear from Rik, tell him it'll be a lot tougher for him if we have to run him to earth. Best thing would be for him to go to the nearest firehouse, give himself up."

Kay was puzzled. "You mean a police station."

"A firehouse," he repeated. "This is a Fire Department matter. We lost one of our boys. We'll get the party who was responsible."

"I'll tell him what you say." She stooped before the refrigerator.

He went down to the lobby. Joe wasn't in sight. The man sitting at the switchboard might have passed unnoticed along Advertising Row in the Forties, so excellent was his protective coloration. His jovial features, his golf-links windburn, his dark flannel suit, his white executive-type shirt, the jaunty felt cocked insolently on the side of his head—all gave the lie to the fact that Shaner was one of the most dependable bulldogs in the Bureau.

"Hi, coach," he said. "Want to hear that tearful little earful?"

"Let's have it, Ed."

The deputy consulted an open notebook on the switchboard shelf.

"Stavro dame: 'The most awful thing—Mamma's been killed!'"

Pedley interrupted: "Sure she said *killed*?"

"No tape recorder could be more positive, coach. There's

no point trying to repeat what the Tedder woman said because it added up to nothing. 'Oh!' and 'Yes?' and 'Terrible'—just come-on conversation."

"She knew I could hear what she said."

"Well, Stavro dame goes on: 'Her house caught on fire just a little while ago, she burned to death. The firemen came too late to save her. And Rikky was over there but the firemen wouldn't even let him go in the apartment. They treated him horribly, beat him up and tried to arrest him but he got away from them and came over here.'"

"Any mention of handcuffs?"

"No—but—this is still the Stavro dame—'His wrists are all cut and burned and his clothing is all torn and dirty, so he wants you to pack a suitcase with his gray suit and some shirts and send it up here.' Babe upstairs asks, 'Why there?' and La Stavro comes back, 'Because he says now Mamma is dead he couldn't stand it at home any longer; he's going to go to his father. He says you never understood him, no one understood him except Mamma.'"

Pedley thought of the boy's callous attitude about the corpse in the tarpaulin. "He's hard to understand, all right. What else, Ed?"

"Now comes the big enigma, coach. Stavro woman says, 'But I'll try to keep him here because, you know, Alex is where Rikky couldn't be with him anyway. And neither of us wants Rikky to get hurt. So you send his things and I'll try to make him get some rest and call you back later.'"

"Where the kid couldn't be with him? In jail?" Pedley shook his head, dismissing the idea.

Shaner closed the notebook. "Hospital, maybe?"

"A hideout, more likely. All right, Ed, keep listening to this station. And lend me your car keys."

"The old chariot is horse *de combat*, hah?" The deputy handed over a key ring. "How long will you require my

services on this job, coach? This being Labor Day weekend, I have certain social commitments . . .”

“Cancel ’em. You stay put—and if you let that beatnik sneak in past you, I’ll put you back to brass polishing.” He gazed bleakly at his deputy. “You knew Pete Arnette?”

“Used to be handball champ at Ladder Fifty-eight?”

“He got it over at the Little Italy thing.”

“See what you mean,” Shaner said quietly. “You call the plays, coach; I’ll be right in there.”

“Tell Barney I’m going up to Helen Stavro’s.” Pedley went out, found Shaner’s Buick parked halfway down the block toward Columbus.

Before he started the motor he took the pill Doc had given him; he would have preferred to stop in at a lunch counter and stoke up on ham and eggs and fried potatoes but breakfast would have to be postponed.

He used the Drive. There were whitecaps on the Hudson and sea gulls circling around the big, gray Navy ships moored far out in the river. A stubby tug with a beard of rope matting butted the current on the Jersey side. He wondered if Pete had ever taken his kids picnicking over there along the shore, under the shadow of the Palisades.

The Riverside address was one of the old four-story apartment houses built in the twenties, fashionable enough in those days but a bit down at the heels almost forty years later.

Helen Stavro was engraved on the card above the D mailbox just inside the mullioned door. He didn’t touch the buzzer button but went down the central hall to the last door on the right, rapped briskly on the tarnished gilt D.

For a moment he heard nothing, then the quick *click-clicking* of high heels at a trot:

“You try to get in here—” the woman’s voice was low

but vehement—"what you'll get is a slug in the stomach!"

He moved aside in case she wasn't bluffing. "I'm from the Fire Department, Miss Stavro." He made no effort to keep his voice down. "You want me to have the superintendent let me in?"

"Get away; I'll call the police."

"Hurry up about it, then." He raised his voice, reached around to knock more loudly. "If you don't open up in one minute, I'm going to get the super to use his passkey."

She opened the door suddenly, wide open, but without showing herself. "Come on in here, let me get a peek at you." She spoke from behind the door. "Don't start anything unless you want me to light you up."

He walked in. "You're acting foolishly, Miss Stavro. What would have stopped me from putting my weight against the door, squashing you against the wall?" He sauntered on a few steps. "Who were you intending to welcome with the gun?"

She was a bosomy woman in her mid-thirties; she might have been beautiful, he considered, if it were not for the signs of hard living and heavy drinking in the dark circles beneath her eyes and the first indications of fleshiness beneath her chin. She wore a rose-colored house dress over a pink slip; her hair was still in pin curls. "Never mind who I was expecting." She slammed the door shut, pointed a nickel-plated barrel at him. "What you want here?"

"Your nephew." He turned his back on her, strolled into a living room that looked like the Chinese wing of an art museum: brocaded curtains, waist-high dragon vases, grotesquely overcarved teak tables, jade-encrusted screens, porcelain Buddhas, scrolls of silk painting on the walls.

"Rik's gone."

"He was here, quarter of an hour ago?"

"Yes, but he's gone." She put the revolver in the pocket

of her dress. "He told me not to call Kay; he said you'd have her phone covered. Soon's I hung up, he took off."

"Handcuffs and all?" He glanced in a bedroom, opened the closet door. A strong, musky perfume came from the dresses on the hangers.

"Now *you're* being foolish. You couldn't keep bracelets on that boy; he's smart. He doesn't take after his mother; he's a real Stavro." She cocked her head on one side, like an inquisitive bird.

"He wasn't so smart if he set his gran'ma's house on fire." He gave the kitchen swift inspection: a big old-fashioned kitchen with a double sink, a breakfast table and . . . a rusty fire escape outside one of the two windows.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, towser." She turned her head toward the hall door, listening. "Rik was crazy about Mamma; he'd have crucified anybody who tried to hurt her."

"How'd you know she'd been hurt before she was killed?" He had his back to her as he asked the question but he watched her reflection in the glass of the china closet above the table.

"I didn't say so." She was flustered. "All I meant . . . if anybody *had* tried to—"

He waited a few seconds for her to finish but she did not. "If anybody had tried to make her tell about that hiding place behind the medicine cabinet? That what you meant?"

Helen whipped the gun from her pocket. "*You found it!*" She ran at him, jamming the muzzle into his ribs. "Where is it? Tell me what you did with it or I'll light you up right this instant!"

SEVEN

Pedley wondered why, if the kid was so fond of his aunt, he hadn't told her about the medicine cabinet, but he said nothing about that; he said, with a show of disappointment, "Tell me you looked after your mother in first-rate fashion, Miss Stavro. Went to see her regularly, all that. You must have thought a lot of the old lady. Yet here she's only been dead a couple hours and all you seem to be concerned about is that somebody stole whatever it was that had been cached in her bathroom."

She cursed him sullenly.

He raised his hand, slowly, so as not to rattle her into misreading his intention, touched the fresh burn on his jaw. "Hard to believe that you don't give a damn how much your mother suffered. Maybe that's because you don't realize how it hurts to be burned badly. I know; I just had a taste of it. But that was just a lick; your mother took really savage punishment."

"Mamma didn't feel anything! She suffocated."

"That what Rik told you? They won't be able to tell until after the autopsy, but I think she died of shock before she could have been asphyxiated. I know, for sure, that someone put her through half an hour of screeching hell before she died." He pointed at the gas stove. "Light that burner. Stick your fingers in the flame. Try it just three seconds. You'd pass out from the pain. I don't know how long your mother had to stand it, but long enough

certainly so she would have been glad to lose consciousness. Imagine that old lady, lying there in agony, while someone tortured her with that glowing cigar tip . . . !”

“What are you talking about! *Torture?*” The pressure against his ribs increased.

“Unbearable torture, yes. Think I’m exaggerating? Go down to the morgue. See her body. The marks are plain.”

“Goddam you!” Her lips drew back in a snarl.

“If you didn’t care enough for your mother to want to see the bastard who did that caught and punished . . .”

“I care enough; I care plenty.” Her eyes blazed ferociously but the hand holding the gun dropped to her side. “Rikky didn’t tell me.”

“He didn’t even bother to look at her body when he had the chance. All he was interested in was—whatever was hidden there in her bathroom.”

“You got Rikky wrong. He loved her, too, but—” She put the revolver back in her pocket. “I got to have a shot.” She opened a kitchen cabinet, took down a half-empty bottle of gin. “You?”

“Not before breakfast.”

“Par’m me.” She tilted the bottle, swallowed, shuddered. “A cigar tip. Oh, God!” She took another drink. “I’ll find him and burn *his* goddam eyes out with a cigar tip!”

“Find who . . . ?”

“If you’re leveling, there’s only one bastard inhuman enough to do a terrible thing like that.” She set the bottle back on the shelf. “I’ll probably get myself confined for talking to you at all, but the hell with it.” She bent her head as if to stare at her feet. “I’m Mamma’s daughter as much as I’m Alex’s sister. He can’t expect me to stand still for that.” She ran the fingers of both hands through her hair, wildly. “Ever hear of a scumbum named Frankie Kolz?”

The name meant nothing to Pedley. “Is he a hood?”

"Heistman. Record as long as a pipe line."

"Out on parole? Or on bond?"

"I don't know what he's out on. I can't tell you what he looks like, either; I've never seen him. At that, maybe I couldn't tell you even if I had seen him. Alex says he looks different every time you run across him." She ran water from the tap into a coffeepot, pushed the pilot button, watched the blue flames morosely. "Frankie's one of these make-up artists. I thought you were Frankie when I saw you. See, they call him Frankie the Actor; one day he's a priest in a black hat and a turned-around collar, next he'll be a postman in a gray uniform or a mechanic in greasy coveralls."

"If he uses disguises like those on stickup jobs, he ought to be easy to identify; his victims wouldn't be distracted by having to remember what he was wearing."

"Maybe they'd be distracted by a slug from a forty-five."

"A real bad actor, hah? Your brother worked with him on one of these holdups?"

"I didn't say that," she retorted sharply. "I don't know anything about Alex's part or if he *had* any part in that Kentucky bank job. Except that, afterward, he was given the stuff so he could keep it on ice until it cooled off."

He made a guess. "Hot money."

"Too hot to handle. Brand-new bills. Fresh off the press."

Pedley's mind backtracked to headlines of a month before: TWO DEAD AS BANDITS LOOT LOUISVILLE BANK—\$150,000 STOLEN IN DARING DAYLIGHT RAID. "How much was it?"

"Alex wouldn't say; a potful, anyhow. All big denominations. They fixed it with him to get it changed down. You know, fives and tens, old money. But he had to stash it somewhere until the cashiers at hotels and the sellers at parimutuel windows and the gamblers at Las Vegas quit looking at the serial numbers."

"So he gave it to your mother to keep."

"He told her to hide it where no snoopshoe could find it. But then, Tuesday, they picked Alex up for questioning. They don't have a thing on him; he wasn't mixed up in the heist and he'd sooner die than sing. But somehow Frankie heard that the district attorney's brain-washers had hold of Alex. He got the notion Alex might make a deal, swap the dough for a light sentence."

"I've heard of such arrangements."

"So Frankie called me, nine o'clock yesterday morning, I mean Thursday morning. He asked if I'd heard from Alex; of course, I hadn't. So he said I probably would be hearing from him and to give him an urgent message: Frankie wanted his property back today or else."

Pedley went to the window, opened it, looked down. The fire escape ended a couple of feet below the sill; it was a five-foot drop to a small alley lined with galvanized garbage cans. The cover of one can was deeply dented, as if a pair of paratrooper boots had landed on it. "Or else what?"

"He said Alex's family would pay, if Alex didn't return the property. Well, Alex did call, yesterday around noon, and I gave him the message. He said he couldn't do anything about it, even if he wanted to; the stuff wasn't where he could get hold of it until they let him out on bail and he didn't know when that might be."

"Why didn't he send word to your mother to turn over the money to you?"

"Because when he took it to Mamma, he had made her promise never to give it to anyone but him and then only if he came there to get it. She wasn't to pay any attention to written or telephoned instructions from him to turn over the box, especially not to any urgent messages delivered in person and supposed to come from him. See, he'd been afraid they'd pick him up and give him the full treatment in the back room. He figured maybe he'd crack under the

pressure and tell where the dough was hidden; then his chances of making a deal would be out the window. To make sure he couldn't tell the hiding place, he wouldn't even let Mamma tell him where she was going to hide the box. But when he heard what Frankie had said to me, he told me to go over to Mamma's and get her to give the money to me."

"She wouldn't."

"No. She'd promised Alex not to. She hadn't wanted to take the box in the first place; she suspected what it might be. You know, Mamma was a real good woman; she always blamed herself for not bringing Alex up to be honest, like my father; he was a plasterer and worked hard every day of his life." She poured a cup of coffee, added a dollop of gin, gazed unhappily at the Marshal across the rim of the lifted cup. "Now you see why I was so upset when I thought you'd found the box. If you had—and had turned it over to the authorities, Alex wouldn't have any way to make his deal with the D.A. And Frankie would be gunning for me or Rik."

"How'd your nephew learn about the money?"

"I told him. Yesterday afternoon, after I'd been to see Mamma. I sent him over there, around four, to see if he could find out where she had hidden the box. He didn't have any better luck than I had." She blew on the coffee; the exhalation was like a sigh of despair. "I wish you *had* grabbed it. Then I could sic Frankie onto you. Now he'll think I have the money. I'll be afraid to move a step outside this apartment."

"Be a good idea to stay close to base anyway, Miss Stavro. I may want to talk to you again. Where are they holding your brother?"

"He didn't tell me, or couldn't."

"Then how will your nephew know where to find him?"

"I don't see how he can. But Rikky's unpredictable; he'll

try anything, no matter how desperate, if he thinks it will help his father. Alex is a hero to that boy. And now that Mamma's gone . . ."

"He'll call you back to see what I had to say to you. When he does, you tell him the best thing he can do to help his father is to go to his lawyer's office, ask Pendiff to contact me." The smell of good coffee was a strong temptation but he was in a hurry; he strode out to the hall door.

"Better watch out for Frankie Kolz." She looked five years older than when he had come in.

"Expect there are twenty-five thousand men in uniform who are keeping an eye out for him." He opened the door.

A red-headed, hard-faced man in a rumpled white linen uniform stood just outside holding out an aluminum tray:

"Hot rolls, hard rolls, Parkerhouse, coffee cake?" The man pushed the tray forward aggressively.

Pedley reached out quickly, whipped up the shiny cover of the tray.

Startled, the bakeryman drew back. The tray tipped, rolls bounced along the corridor. "Hey, what the—!"

The Marshal apologized; he reached for his pocket, produced a dollar. "Sorry, friend. Wanted to see if you had any Danish pastry. But I'll take one of those coffee cakes." To himself he spoke more sharply: *Just because a baker's man wears brown shoes with a white uniform is no reason for you to get jumpy. There are more rational places for a man to keep a forty-five than under a layer of Parkerhouse rolls. Keep on this way, you'll be seeing Frankie the Actor on every street corner!*

Nevertheless, he kept a lookout in both directions for loiterers, when he carried the paper sack with the coffee cake out to the Buick.

E I G H T

The big ladder truck was back in its accustomed place on the apparatus floor when he came into the firehouse. A couple of T-shirted men were washing down; they lifted hands in greeting but attempted none of the kidding which the Marshal was used to encountering. Ladder Fifty-eight was taking its loss hard.

He climbed upstairs to the shade-darkened bunkroom. Four pairs of boots with turnout pants tucked in them stood at the foot of the cots; he heard no snores nor any of that labored breathing so often heard after a man had been taking too much smoke. Pedley had an idea some of the quartet were awake but he kept right on walking, quietly, into the back room.

The television set was silent, in that combination mess hall and recreation room. At the oilcloth-covered table sat the Lieutenant, uniform coat draped over the back of his chair. At the stove, the lanky man, with a face reminiscent of Lincoln in its strongly boned homeliness, was the one who had carried Pete Arnette to the street after the back-flash.

"Chance for a mug of Old Black Joe?" Pedley took a plate from the cupboard, put the cake on it. "Not much of a contribution to the steward's department, but it's fresh."

Lieutenant Swisher grunted. "Ones we get are generally tough as a steam hose, Marshal. Larry'll fix you up with ham and, if you haven't eaten. Know Larry Foster?"

Pedley held out his hand. "I could take care of a short order, at that."

Larry pointed with a cooking fork toward the refrigerator. "How's about a flock of home-fried?"

"Fine." Pedley shed his raincoat, dropped into a chair across from the Lieutenant.

Larry set a steaming mug before him. Swisher went to work on the coffee cake. For several minutes the only sound was the sizzling of potatoes in the frying pan.

They would be thinking about Pete. Here with Pete's truck mates, it was difficult for the Marshal, too, to put the dead fireman out of his mind. But there were other things to get straight. He began to sort them out, waiting, silently, for breakfast.

The fire had certainly been set to cover up the torture of the old woman and her subsequent death. Either the arsonist had found the loot hidden in that recess behind the medicine cabinet, or someone else had. Only one alternate possibility there. If the firebug had been Frankie the Actor, the only problem would be to run him to earth. Answer to that will be whether Frankie tries to put more pressure on Helen Stavro, Kay Tedder or Rik.

If it wasn't Frankie, then which of the others? The kid seemed the most likely suspect, but in Pedley's experience no firebug had ever come running back to the scene of the crime while police and firemen were still on the job. Psychopathic fire-setters, sometimes. Cold-blooded arsonists, never.

"How'll you have your eggs, Marshal?"

"Sunny side, Larry." If not the boy, how about his mother? Somehow she hadn't seemed to be the sort of person who could put a helpless old woman through half an hour of excruciating pain and then set fire to a tenement block packed with sleeping children and old people. And,

as far as Helen Stavro was concerned, if she had not been genuinely shocked at his description of her mother's suffering, he was no longer as good a judge of human nature as he liked to believe.

Swisher brushed sugar crumbs from the oilcloth. "Chief said you thought there might have been something funny about that girl who phoned in the alarm."

"You know, Lieutenant, the party who first spots a big fire and calls the engines generally can't wait to tell all the friends and neighbors about it."

"Sure. So I checked. One of the neighbors, lived right across the street from the dead woman, happened to be up about five minutes before the apparatus arrived. Old buck had a toothache, got up to take a drink of muscatel, deaden the pain. He peeked down on the street—there wasn't any show of fire from Mamma Carlotta's apartment at that time—and there was this babe, coming out of five-forty-nine."

Pedley said, "He'd have recognized her if she'd been one of the tenants."

"Yuh, sure. Reason he noticed her, particularly, was she was wearing a fur stole. Don't see many of those around that section of town, especially this time of year."

"Could he describe her?"

"No. He lived on the fourth floor, so he was looking down on her; I don't think his eyesight is very good, anyway. But he had the impression she was a young chick; something about the brisk way she went striding along, I gathered." The Lieutenant rose. "He went back to bed then, didn't think any more about it. I'm about to do the same. See you . . ."

"Much obliged, Lieutenant." Pedley tackled his ham and eggs.

After Swisher departed, Larry Foster clattered dishes in

the sink for a while. Presently he spoke without turning around.

"March, a year ago, he hauled me out of a subcellar over on Ninth Avenue; that cold-storage-plant blaze. That was a real worker. I got a whiff of those ammonia fumes. But he got me out. I'm here and he's . . . gone."

"One of the best, Peter was, yair."

"I don't feel like talking about him. I . . . just . . . can't." Larry flapped his dish towel. "But I saw that medicine cabinet, marked for an exhibit. Was that because you think the tenement was firebugged?"

"That's what my report to the Commissioner is going to say."

"What I figured. You brought the cabinet to my firehouse because you want to ask me about it."

"Correct. When you and Pete first went into the old lady's apartment, was the cabinet screwed in place above the wash basin?"

"No, sir, Marshal. It was *in* the basin; there was this big hole chipped out of the plaster behind where it had been hung."

"No sign of whatever had been tucked away in that recess?"

"Not a thing. We both noticed it but neither of us thought it was important. I supposed the hole had been made to take some homemade shelves, for soap and so on, before there had been a medicine cabinet there. I figured a blast of hot gases had blown the cabinet off the wall."

"Maybe a smaller cabinet had been set into the wall at some time, Larry. But lately it had been used as a hiding place."

The ladderman came back to the table. "There wasn't anything in that hole in the wall when Pete and I were

there, guarantee that. An' if there *had* been, we wouldn't have touched it."

"I know you wouldn't. The arsonist got it."

"In my book, that rat is just the same as Pete's murderer, Marshal."

"That's right."

"Then anything I can do to help you get him . . ." Larry brandished a frying pan fiercely.

"Best thing you can do right now is cork off for a while." The Marshal rose. "Thanks for the short order, fella." He went downstairs, used the phone in the Lieutenant's office.

"Barney, another checkup chore."

"Kayo, Skipper, but—"

"Frank Kolz, that's a K and a Z; he'll be in the nickname file at Criminal Identification as Frankie the Actor."

"Seem to recall a flyer out on that specimen, recently. But listen, Skipper—"

"I don't care about the flyer; I want to know if there's been a pickup alert out on him, Barney. When and where and who put it out."

"Okeydokey. But Russ just called in with some dope—"

"Shoot it."

"Woman who lived in the room underneath Mrs. Stavro claims the old lady's son came to see her last night."

"Mamma Carlotta's son?"

"Exactly. Name of Alex. Fella around forty, a Mister Five-by-Five, fat but not jolly. Woman Russ spoke to knows him well. Thing is, Alex and his mamma had a terrific setto, regular cat-and-dog fight, around nine last night. Shouting and screaming and thumping around. So Russ thought you might want the son rounded up for a slight interview."

"I've heard he's already been rounded up but maybe there's been some mistake about that. If Russ calls back

tell him I want a deposition from that tenant; from anybody else who happened to see Stavro while he was there."

"You want the *précis* on Mamma Carlotta now?"

"Hold it. I'll be right down, Barney."

"Tsk, tsk. I damn near forgot; you had a call from a Mr. Pendiff, an attorney."

"Did I now! Well, well. Buzz him back, Barney. Ask him to run 'round to the Bureau soon as he can make it."

NINE

Barney Malloy labored at the typewriter like a man thumping at a calliope. At his left elbow, on a pile of confidential bulletins from "Jockey Joe, The Long-Shot Wizard," stood an ash tray overloaded with cigarette stubs and a cardboard container which still held the dregs of cold coffee. The right-hand slide of his desk held several clippings about the Little Italy blaze taken from early editions, a stenographer's notebook opened to a page of cabalistic scrawls, and a dollar bill clipped to a pool entry for the double-header at the Stadium.

Barney's stubby nose, heavy jaw and aggressively protruding lower lip, his alert bronze eyes beneath brows so white as to appear almost hairless, generally reminded the Marshal of a nervous but amiable Boston bull terrier. However, when Pedley pushed open the door of the outer office, about quarter to nine, there was no amiability in the expression of his confidential clerk.

"Of all the lousy luck. Two hundred firemen on the job—" he touched the clippings—"and the one they tapped out the three Fives for had to be ol' Pete." He took notice of the Marshal's limp, the burn marks, the strained tautness of his boss's face. "You don't look like you been to any PTA meeting."

"Bit singed around the edges. Mite of sliver trouble. Better than a broken neck and a caved-in skull. At that, Pete got it quick; no suffering." Pedley was taking off his

scorched necktie as he crossed to his private office. "You reach Pendiff?"

"At home. Said it would take him half an hour to get down here. That would be in another quarter hour, say nine."

"Where's he live?" The Marshal was peeling off his clothes.

"Six-twenty East Fifty-eight. Office at thirty Rockefeller Plaza." Barney read from a slip. "Pendiff, Nathaniel M., Attorney."

"Lives on the East Side?" Pedley's chin went up, like a dog sniffing a faint scent of quail. "What's his home phone?"

"Murray Hill two-one-four-seven-seven."

"Kid was trying to outsmart us, hah?" The Marshal tossed the burnt shirt in the wastebasket. "Call Ed, will you? Ask him to get through to his friend at the phone company, find the name and address of the subscriber at Chelsea two-one-seven-six-nine."

"You want me to rush out a pickup on that problem child?"

"Let him ramble for a while." Pedley's voice was muffled by the shower. "He may be more useful on the loose."

After the sound of toweling ceased, Barney raised his voice: "Ed wants to know if you have any instructions about Miss Tedder's leaving the Varamista with a heavy suitcase and grabbing a cab."

"Clue him in, Barney; she's not about to jet-plane to Shannon; she's taking some of the kid's clothes to her sister-in-law. She'll be back. We do want to know how long she stays with the boy's aunt, though. He's to stick there on the board."

"Shaner says the day man has come on duty and is giving him a hard time."

Pedley snorted. "Tell Ed not to take it; give it right back to the guy."

"Yuh, yuh. More fun . . ."

The Marshal was pulling on freshly creased trousers by the time Barney finished on the phone and grumbled a complaint:

"On this Frankie the Actor, Skipper. Either we're flying blind in a thick fog or else we're being given the ol' run-around. That was the prosecutor's office; they have no information on any Kolz or anyone who sounds like it, no Coles or Colts, complete blank."

"Headquarters claim ignorance too?"

"No record of any arrest or detention. No pickup request from the Burns people or any of the other big agencies. Boys at Identification insist there hasn't been any flyer, only a Federal Wanted bulletin some time ago, stating that Frankie the Actor is suspected of being involved in the fatal shooting of a bank guard."

"Probably you saw it on the board in the Post Office one day when you were in there. Happen to recall the photo? Is he bald?"

"Now you mention it, I think he is an onionhead." Barney came to the door of the Marshal's office. "You saw his picture somewheres, too."

"Uh-uh." Pedley adjusted the electric razor for his scorched skin. "But he's supposed to specialize in impersonations. If so, chances are he wears wigs to help along the disguises, towhead this week, redhead next. Helps to have a smooth pate to hang those hairpieces on."

"If you called that long shot right," Barney marveled, "you ought to be picking them at Belmont." He gazed at his boss with candid admiration. "We ought to have verification in the next half-hour or so. The FBIs are sending over a copy of that Wanted bulletin. But they deny know-

ing anything about Frankie's being in New York; I didn't quote Russ on the subject."

"Good. What you got on Mamma Carlotta?"

"Funny thing, old lady might have been dead and buried for twenty years for all the attention she's attracted in all that time. No police record, though there's a file full on son Alex. Credit Bureau don't have her listed. She hasn't been on the relief rolls; the insurance people apparently never heard of her. But you said to dig deep, so I kept a-drilling."

"Hit oil?"

"In the Bureau of Licenses. Twenty years ago she ran a restaurant down on Delancey, Carlotta's Grotto. Spaghetti spot, home cooking, red-checkered tablecloths, real olive oil in the cruets, all the breadsticks you could eat, *lasagna* and *pasta fazole*—"

"I remember it," Pedley cut in. "So . . . ?"

"Near as I can dope out from the restaurant licenses and the clips in the newspaper morgues, she's making good profits, seating nearly three hundred in her place, had nearly twenty-five people working for her, kitchen help and all. So *voom*, she goes broke." Barney consulted his page of hieroglyphics. "It couldn't be just coincidence that one month before she filed in bankruptcy court, her son goes on trial for taking part in a tricky swindle—manipulating the accounts receivable paper for a textile exporting firm he'd organized."

"Convicted?"

"The factors, the outfit he'd gypped, settled out of court and refused to press charges, but the prosecutor sent him up for three anyway. He got out in nine months, somehow or other; he's been in and out most of the time since."

"Evidently she converted everything she could get her

hands on into cash to save him, and had to go out of business."

Barney returned to his desk to answer the phone. The Marshall stood by the window looking down on the traffic jam, a stream of weekenders heading for Long Island.

Twenty years of disappointment and disillusionment for the old lady. Would she have sacrificed the business she had built up, could she have endured the subsequent years of shame, if she could have foreseen what would happen after all her sacrifices? Very likely she would have, he decided. Very likely indeed. The maternal instinct worked out that way.

Had that uncontrollable instinct been responsible for what had happened in that dingy tenement last night? Why that strange procession of visitors, her daughter, her grandson, her son, perhaps the girl in the fur stole, perhaps someone not yet reported by the neighbors. . . .

He glanced through the newspaper clippings which Barney had put on his desk.

His confidential clerk came in with a memo:

Fassler, Vera, 174½ W. 25
Chelsea 2-1769

"Who she, Skipper?"

"Someone the problem child wanted to call when he thought he was going to be booked into a cell. Let's see, West Twenty-fifth, nearest company would be Engine Sixteen. You might ring Sam Gannet, see if any of his boys can brief you on the lady's background, Barney."

Someone came into the outer office. A young man in an Italian silk suit, wearing an expensive Leghorn straw and carrying an attaché case of tooled Florentine leather. He was tall and good-looking in an outdoor manner, well-

tanned, crew-cut and very white of tooth. He displayed the teeth.

"Marshal Pedley? Nat Pendiff."

"Come in, sit." The Marshal motioned for Barney to close the door of the private office behind him. "You represent Richard Stavro, Mr. Pendiff?"

"No, no. I've never met the boy. What gave you that notion?"

"He wanted to call you early this morning, when he was afraid he was going to be jailed."

"In connection with the fire at his grandmother's? I read about it in the paper."

"If you don't know the kid, how'd you happen to ring me?"

"I phoned at the request of his father. I'm attorney for Alexander Stavro."

"Where's your client?"

"That I can't tell you."

"Can't . . . or won't?"

"I don't know where Stavro is; I'd tell you quickly enough if I knew. He's in town, in custody but not incommunicado. He phones me, or my office, every day. I assume the Interpol people won't allow him to inform me as to his whereabouts."

Pedley sat down at his desk. "We're dealing with a real hot-shot, hah? What do the International Police Organization people want him for?"

"Chiefly for questioning about his associates abroad, I gather." The lawyer produced an oilskin tobacco pouch from his coat pocket, filled a long-stemmed briar carefully. "I presume you know Stavro's history; he's been mixed up with some extremely unsavory characters, both here and abroad. Specifically, with certain individuals who make a business of passing off stolen bonds and sometimes stolen

money in Paris, London, Rome. That type of criminal invariably slides into counterfeiting, I'm told." He used a pipe lighter. "What exercised Stavro this morning was the death of his mother and the arrest of his son."

"How'd he learn the boy had been detained? It wasn't in the newspapers."

"Richard telephoned him. That was the first Stavro knew of the fire. The boy said he'd been beaten up by the Fire Marshal, accused of setting fire to his grandmother's house and of stealing something from her apartment."

"Three times at bat, no hits. Instead of being manhandled, he wrecked a Department vehicle, nearly put me in the hospital. We haven't accused him of firebugging the old lady's flat but the person who did is going to the chair, Mr. Pendiff. And I'm reasonably certain Rik didn't steal anything from his grandmother's tenement but I'm damned sure he knows what was stolen, maybe who took it. I expect you're going to say you don't know where the boy is, either?"

"You read my mind, Marshal. I don't know and don't care where the son is. I'm not getting a fee for keeping the son out of your clutches. From what little I know of him, I believe he'd be better off behind bars than outside them. The reason I came here—" he touched the attaché case—"is to offer, on behalf of Stavro, a reward of ten thousand dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons who set the fire that caused his mother's death."

T E N

Pedley sized up the lawyer: certainly shrewd, possibly unscrupulous, obviously successful . . . which added up to the conclusion that he was presenting the offer of the reward with the thought of a subsequent jury trial and the effect which such an offer by Stavro might be expected to have on emotionally susceptible jurors.

"You ought to know the Bureau can't be influenced by rewards, Mr. Pendiff. We get paid by the city; we couldn't accept money if we wanted to."

The attaché case came open; a blue-backed document was proffered. "The sum is in escrow at the Fidelity National."

"Why don't you advertise it in the press?"

"My client doesn't want publicity."

"If we don't get a chance to question him in a hurry, he'll be plastered with more publicity than he's ever had in his life. You claim you don't know where Stavro is; well, I can tell you where he was around nine last night. He was at his mother's place; they had words, loud words . . . and they were overheard."

The lawyer closed the case, snapped the catches thoughtfully. "You think you could make that appear damaging in a presentation to the Grand Jury? A family quarrel isn't a felony."

"Concealing stolen property is," the Marshal countered.

"That's what the argument was about: the disposition of stolen property."

"I'm sure," Pendiff said smoothly, "you wouldn't make such a statement unless you were prepared to prove it."

"I can back it up, all right. But I'm not interested in anything but a conviction for first-degree arson. I'll let Interpol or the Justice Department boys or our prosecutor worry about that Louisville loot; what I want is the party who set that fire. Maybe Stavro didn't do it, but he can help me find out who did. So get this straight; if you don't produce your client by noon—and by 'produce' I mean arrange things so I can question him, whether it's here or in your office or anywhere else—I'm going to smoke him out with the help of the newspapers. I'll have his photo on the front page of every evening edition along with the story about the box packed with big-denomination bills, about his partner, Frankie—"

Pendiff held up both hands. "Don't threaten, Marshal. It just happens that I told you the truth; I don't know how to get in touch with my client. It's one of those don't-call-me, I'll-call-you setups. So I don't see what I can do."

"The kid knows where he is. How come Rik can reach him?"

"It's aggravating to have to admit I can't figure that out." The lawyer stood up. "If my client does call me before noon, I'll certainly recommend that he permit me to arrange a meeting with you."

"Tell him he'd better talk to me before Frankie the Actor talks to him."

The lawyer knocked ashes from his pipe into the wastebasket beside the Marshal's desk. "You know, these references to murder and arson put my relationship with my client in a difficult light. I had no idea I might have to defend him against any such charges as those. But I assure

you I will do so, if necessary, because—whatever else Stavro may have done—he is not guilty of any such crimes, in my opinion.”

“If I haven’t talked to him by twelve, I’ll be talking to the reporters by half past.”

Pendiff nodded. “You’ll hear from me, one way or the other.” He went away without offering his hand.

Barney waited until the corridor had swallowed the Italian silk suit. “Must be a smart operator to afford clothes like that.”

“I guess so. His clients steal the money and wind up doing a stretch; he gets a cut of the money and stays out of jail. I guess that’s one sort of smartness. Did that bulletin on Frankie the Actor come in?”

“Not yet. But Captain Gannet came through on the Fassler girl.”

“What is she—a daughter of joy?”

“Ah, now, the fancy words he uses!” Barney put on a bit of the brogue. “The Captain says she’s the best looker south of the Copacabana, rich enough to own a three-story brownstone valued at forty, forty-five thousand, bought it last year. And she has the reputation of being the most popular party girl in the Chelsea district.”

“Married, divorced, widowed or what?”

“What is right. She’s only twenty-two or so, the Captain estimates. One of these sultry sexpots. Where she gets her money, deponent knoweth not, but she has it. Drives a lilac Caddy only a couple of feet shorter than a ladder truck. Always takes a basketful of ducats to the Firemen’s Benevolent Ball.”

“She’s not a socialite or she wouldn’t have bought a house in that part of the city. If she’s a refugee from Hollywood, the name is new to me. Sounds like some tycoon’s gal-pal. Ask Retail Credit what they know about her.”

While Barney was checking, the Marshal considered the Interpol angle. He knew little of the organization; neither professional firebugs nor psychopathic arsonists flew from continent to continent as did forgers, embezzlers and narcotics peddlers, sometimes. No firebug ever salted away sufficient funds to retire on the Côte d'Azur or at Capri; it was a mean and unremunerative crime, usually. In the present case, perhaps the profit margin had been more attractive. . . .

Barney reported: "Lady has no charge accounts, never applied for any. All they know about her is that she's never been in Small Claims Court, has no judgments of record against her and has her checking account at the Fidelity National Bank."

"Lots of dough, yet no credit cards? Not even a member of the Diners' Club?"

"Strictly a cash customer, that's the word."

"An odd customer for Rik Stavro to be friendly with. Unless—" From the shelf in the closet, Pedley took a steel-gray hat which had only one small spark-hole in its snap brim.

"Aren't you going to wait for that Federal bulletin?"

"Time's a-wastin', Barno. This high-class hussy may be the kid's contact." He stopped by the corridor door to add: "When Russ calls in, if he has those depositions, ask him to drop around at the Broome Street labs; I left Mamma Carlotta's medicine cabinet there for a fingerprint check. Those technicians ought to be finished with it by now. I'll meet Russ here, around eleven."

He drove uptown, found a parking place for the Buick, ten minutes later, near the corner of Sixth.

A postman, trudging from one house to the next with his leather pouch, reminded him of what Helen Stavro had said about Frankie the Actor. But there was no reason to

anticipate that the bank robber would have any interest in the resident at 174½, up ahead there. Still—he wondered if Vera Fassler flaunted a fur stole in the summertime.

The house was imposing: a remodeled structure with a facing of pink stucco, marble steps, wrought-iron hand railings and a door of some white plastic material that rivaled the marble for dignity.

A Negro woman, an Aunt Jemima for bulk and breadth, opened the door. "Good morning." A Jamaican by her pleasant accent, he thought. She wore a Nile-green uniform with a lace cap of the same color.

"Miss Fassler in?"

"She in but not up. Unless it's really important . . ."

"It is; it can't wait. My name is Pedley. I have to see her right away."

The maid made discreet appraisal of his scarred face, his clothing. "You may come in," she said cautiously, "and wait. Wait here while I inquire."

She lumbered upstairs, hauling herself up by the banister at the same time.

He stood at the foot of the stairs, the living-room door at his right. Beneath the stairs was a closet.

As soon as the maid reached the second floor and moved out of his line of vision, he stepped to the closet, opened it quietly.

What he was looking for was a fur neckpiece and there was, actually, a light cloth coat with a collar of broadtail, but no stole. Coats, rainwear, a maid's uniform. Much too small a uniform for Aunt Jemima.

He whisked the hanger out to examine the one-piece garment. It wasn't new; it needed washing and ironing. Inside the collar were stenciled initials in indelible ink: SAR.

The hanger was back on the rod and the door closed; he was standing in the doorway of the living room, marvel-

ing at the impression of Spartan severity which modern furniture can impart to a home, when the maid came to the head of the stairs.

"You may come up, Mr. Pedley."

He went up, was ushered into a bedroom with a thick white chenille rug on the floor and a mirrored ceiling. The bed was Hollywood, covered with a burgundy-colored satin quilt; the quilt had been thrown back; there was no one in the bed.

A door, inset with a full-length mirror, opened suddenly at the other end of the room; a head, turbaned in a char-treuse bath towel, appeared around the jamb. Beneath the turban, a merry face, the face of a mischievous child, eyes sparkling, water drop sparkling on tip of elfin nose.

"Ah, ha! *There* he is!" Neck and shoulders, bare of towel or robe, poked around the door. "The man who simply couldn't wait!"

He would not have been surprised if she had showed herself with no more covering than the turban, but she contented herself, for the moment, with a partial display of bare bosom.

"What is it," she cried gleefully, "just exactly what is it you can't wait for, Mr. Pedley?"

ELEVEN

"Under less serious circumstances, I might react to that strip-tease routine, Miss Fassler." He meant it; she would have tempted any man under ninety. "Sorry to say I'm here on a less agreeable matter, a matter of murder, to put it bluntly."

"How disappointed can a girl *be!*" She made an impulsive movement to emerge, manipulating her bath towel like a fan dancer. "Here the fair young mai-den is wakened with the news that Barnacle Bill is a-knocking at her door . . . and what comes of it all? I get the fast chill."

He didn't smile. "Then perhaps you'd better put something on."

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Anyhow, you don't look like a sailor. You look like a refugee from a cowtown opry. Who *are* you, anyway, to come busting in before breakfast, making with the melodrama?"

"I'm from the Bureau of Fire Investigation. I'm after a firebug who burned down a tenement block on the upper East Side early this morning, killed a couple people."

"A fireman? That figures." She made a modest show of adjusting the towel but seemed unable to control it to her satisfaction. "I can see you *have* been too close to something hot, but really—I'm not *that* inflammable!"

"Some other time, might be fun to find out. But I'm not in the mood. There's an old woman in the morgue and a

father of three in a funeral parlor on account of this incendiary."

"I know just how you must feel. I'm deathly afraid of fire!"

"So am I," he said dryly. "You know Rik Stavro?"

"*Do I!*" The towel slipped; she squealed, made a face, bobbed out of sight. "One sec, while the uncover girl covers up."

The bedroom told nothing of its occupant's personality; it might be, he thought, a furniture display in the Fifth Avenue windows of Sloane's or Altman's. White velvet boudoir chairs, stylized flower prints in thin gilt frames, an artful arrangement of dried fall flowers in Steuben glass vases, the array of gold-backed brushes and combs and hand mirror on the bureau—all might have been found in the apartments of a thousand kept women. Only on the bookshelves at the head of the Hollywood bed was there any indication of the Fassler girl's tastes.

The book ends that supported a small row of paperbacks were small marble reproductions of Diana, the Huntress. The titles were not associated with mythology. Autobiographies of show people who had burned their candles at both ends, Diana Barrymore and Errol Flynn among them. Translations of Parisian novelists who specialized in stories of *amour*—Sagan, Colette. Fat editions of Kinsey and Krafft-Ebing.

Flanking this titillating display were, on one side, a glass bell and a cloisonné cigarette container; on the other, a clock—one of those contrivances housed in a glass dome so the works were visible, a pair of twin golden globes rotating slowly. On the base of the timepiece, minute engraving:

Count but the happy hours
Breathe but the perfumed flowers
A.S.

She appeared suddenly while he was bending to read the inscription. She wore a knee-length beach robe of black terry which set off her slim, well-tanned legs; the turban arrangement still covered her head; her feet were bare.

"I *am* well acquainted with Rik. But not intimately. If you know what I mean."

"Any idea where he is now?"

"None. You see, that's what I was hinting at. He'd have liked to be here." She plumped down on the bed, patted a pillow. "But I haven't been accused of impairing the morals of a minor *yet*; I certainly wouldn't want to begin with *that* adolescent. He rang me, practically at daybreak, positively *imploing* me to let him come and stay with me a few days. I thought perhaps he'd been beering it up with a bunch of the boys so I told him to go sleep it off somewhere else."

"You haven't seen him or heard from him since?"

"I have not. Nor do I expect to. He was sore because I told him to find a girl of his own age to sleep with, not to bother me any more."

"How long has he been bothering you?"

"A year or so; ever since his mother did the décor for my house. He came here with her when the paper hangers were starting." She tinkled the glass bell. "Of course it was my own fault, fooling with the dumb dope in the first place. But he saw that picture of me in fur pants—" she adopted a demure, little-girl-next-door manner, stretching out one leg to inspect her carmined toenails—"fur pants and parka and mukluks, really the *cutest*, maybe you saw the subway posters . . . ?"

"Miss Pilzenbrau of nineteen-sixty? You were the winter sports type photographed with the team of huskies. If you had more clothes on, I might have recognized you."

"Well, he recognized me; I guess I was the first genuine, professional model he'd ever met. He went overboard with

a splash, in beyond his depth, if you know what I mean. He brought me presents he couldn't afford, things that probably weren't his to give away. Then he began to pitch the big talk, about how rich his father was, how he'd inherit gobs and scads from his father's estate. Finally he began to have hand trouble and I had to tell him off, though I didn't want to offend Kay Tedder."

"You used good judgment in not letting him come here today. Harboring a fugitive is a felony."

Her gaze was guileless. "He told me he had to hide out for a few days because someone was gunning for him; I thought that was just a play for sympathy. Do I understand that you are the villain?"

"I'd say not. He was probably referring to a hood named Frankie Kolz. Kolz is a killer. If he's after Rik, that's another reason for not asking him here."

"But *why*? What's Rik *done*?" Vera Fassler smiled at the fat maid, beamed at the tray with the silver pot and the silver toast-warmer and the two cups and saucers.

Pedley switched the subject while the maid fussed with the tray: "When he talked to you this morning, did he mention his father?"

"No. Cream?"

"Touch." Pedley was ready for more coffee. He considered taking another of the doctor's booster pills but postponed it. "Ever met the father?"

"Why, of course not. I understood he and Rik's mother had split up. I only knew Rik through her. Rik says his old man is a rich Greek importer."

"He's Greek, that's all. He's not rich; he's not an importer; he's a crook."

"The wires must be crossed somewhere. Rik said his father could lay his hands on a quarter-million in cash any day he wanted to."

"The catch is, it wouldn't have been the elder Stavro's money." The Marshal drank his coffee, refused a slice of toast, waited until Aunt Jemima had gone downstairs. "Did the kid mention his grandmother?"

"Never knew he had one—alive, I mean."

"She was burned to death in that tenement fire."

"*Tenement!*"

"Old lady lived in a cold-water walkup. Sound like the place for a millionaire's mother?"

"Rik was lying to me." Her eyes flashed with a show of indignation.

"You're fixed up like a queen, in comparison. How do you afford all this on what you make as a model, Miss Fassler?"

"This isn't exactly Buckingham Palace, but at that, I'm certainly entitled to live like a queen, Mr. Pedley. Several queens, in fact, all of which I am."

"The Miss So-and-so racket? Is there that much in it?"

"As Queen of the Cotton Carnival, last year, I netted around eighteen thousand. Queen of the Potato Festival ought to be worth ten, at least. Then I'm to be Costume Jewelry Queen at the Fair and reigning Queen of Furs at the fall showings." She smiled sweetly. "I struggle along somehow."

"I guess you do." He put his cup back on the tray. "I hope you keep on doing all right. Be a shame to drape that shape in prison duds."

She came to her feet swiftly, heedless of the robe's disarray. "Are you, by any chance, trying to throw a scare into me?"

"Giving you fair warning, Miss Fassler. You've been—" he almost said "lying by the clock," but checked himself in time to finish—"doubletalking me all the way. Wait now—" he held up a palm—"you don't seem to realize that

a Fire Marshal isn't like a plain-clothes policeman. I could run you down to the Criminal Courts Building right now and book you for conspiracy; I'm convinced you know where Rik is and how to get in touch with him."

"I'll take a lie detector test," she said sweetly, "if you promise not to ask any questions about my love life. A girl has an inalienable right to lie about *some* things."

"That's so." He nodded agreement. "I expect I'm as tolerant about such matters as most men, maybe a little more so. But my tolerance stops at arson, stops absolutely. You might bear it in mind."

"Dear *me!*" There was a sharp edge to her voice. "You're not even going to wait to zip me up?"

"I might come up and see you again, sometime," he said glumly. "But I don't think you'll like it much if I do."

T W E L V E

The grim lines showed more plainly around his lips as he swung the Buick away from the curb, cut in the short-wave set. Nothing he heard from Barney relieved the strain.

Russ had returned with depositions from Little Italy; he had brought back the medicine cabinet. The laboratory had developed a score of assorted fingerprints, most of them probably Mamma Carlotta's. An FBI check on the others had not yet been returned.

An autopsy report from the Medical Examiner's office showed the old lady had expired from a cardiac embolism, likely the result of severe shock. She had not suffocated; she had died before the fire had reached any sizable proportions for there was no trace of smoke in her lungs.

Ed had called; Kay Tedder had not returned to the Varamista but a parole officer from Juvenile Court had been around, inquiring about Rik.

Pedley asked Barney if the bulletin on Frankie the Actor had arrived.

"Yeah, boy," answered the clerk. "And is he a bad actor! Careless with firearms and accident prone when it comes to carving tools."

"What I'm interested in is whether or not he fancies cigars, but I don't suppose the bulletin would mention that. Did you locate a photo of Alex Stavro in that dossier from Criminal Identification?"

"An old one."

"Give it to Russ with the Kolz data. Ask him to hustle them, along with those depositions, to the Stag Bar at the Saracen."

"You said the Saracen?" Barney didn't trust the reception at his end.

"That's S-A-R, Saracen. Got it?"

"Yeah, boss. Stag Bar."

It was ten-thirty when Pedley put the Buick in a No Parking slot in front of the big Broadway hotel. The Saracen was a city within a city; each day some twenty-five thousand people milled in and around its lobbies, arcades, ticket offices, barber shops, beauty salons, cocktail lounges, restaurants, coffeeshops, banquet halls, convention rooms. The queue waiting to check in, when he pushed through the weekend crowd to an assistant manager's office, was half a block long. There was enough luggage piled near the elevators to fill a five-ton truck.

He identified himself to the assistant manager. On learning that the hotel was not about to be charged with a violation of fire regulations, the hotelman relaxed, became reluctantly cooperative. He rang the head housekeeper, issued firm instructions. Five minutes later, Pedley sat opposite a steely-eyed matron with steely-gray hair and a schoolmistress's attitude of authority.

She was sorry, she would not be able to be of any assistance unless the gentleman knew this employee's name. She had two hundred and sixteen floor maids on regular duty, not to mention others called to fill in for regulars on sick leave. Possibly the girl wasn't a floor maid at all. Had he consulted with Laundry or Upholstery Repair?

Pedley was patient. "I know her name; she wouldn't have used it to get a job here. You shouldn't have much difficulty identifying her. First place, she hasn't been at the Saracen long. Second place, she's on your afternoon or evening

shift; most of your floor maids work eight to four, don't they? Third place, she is, without doubt, the sexiest bunny who ever put on a Saracen uniform." He described her, with flourishes.

The head housekeeper's thin lips compressed to a slit of disapproval. "Now you put it that way, hm . . . yes. You may refer to Polly Ryan. That young lady has been with us exactly one week, less a day. You may depend on it, she will only be on our payroll for this one week. She is to be discharged as of tomorrow night."

"Complaints about her?"

The schoolmistress looked smug. "We protect the reputation of our house by not having complaints, by anticipating trouble. As yet, there have been no unfortunate incidents with male guests; at least none have come to my attention. But she has been . . . um, allowing liberties, shall we say, to certain bellmen. This, we have learned, is invariably a telltale sign of trouble to come. If she will let a bellman pinch her buttocks, she will, eventually, allow some susceptible guest to go further. But not in *this* hotel."

"What floor she work on?"

The steely eyes consulted a wheel index. "Twenty-seventh."

"You assign the same rooms to her every day?"

"Naturally. She is four to midnight on fifty-five through seventy, that is the Times Square wing. Ordinarily a maid is only required to rack up fourteen rooms but some of these are suites with neither bed nor bath in the extra room."

"She gave references when she applied for the job?"

"Her union card; that's all we ever require. She wouldn't have a card from her local unless she had had a reasonably clean record for honesty."

He told her she had been very helpful, cautioned her about mentioning the matter to anyone, added: "And for-

get about firing her until you hear from your front office. She may corrupt a bellman or two but she won't ruin the reputation of any lecherous guest; I'll guarantee it. Just coast along with her until we're through checking."

He was at a banquette in the Stag Bar, with a *café royale* and sixteen registration cards, when a man who looked like a shy Milquetoast, a bookkeeper with an inferiority complex, deposited his brief case on the leather cushion beside the Marshal.

"Late word from the front," Russ Drake said. "Commissioner's secretary demands a written report on this morning's tragedy, by noon if not sooner. Some crummy politician from the Little Italy district feels the old lady could have been saved if MacKinnon's battalion had been more efficient. Brass wants us to establish that she was dead before the alarm hit in."

"No problem there, Russ. Problem is here." Pedley shuffled the registrations. "Man we're after will be in one of these rooms."

His deputy opened the brief case, took out a clipping from the *Times*. "This the man?"

The cut showed a dark, handsome man with bold eyes, middle-parted black hair, a *boulevardier's* mustache. The caption read: *Alexander Stavro, President, Alfo Metals*. The story was about a stock swindle.

"He's the one. Not that he's necessarily our bug, but he can unlock the case, if he wants to. Difficulty is, he's being held by Interpol in connection with some international hanky-panky; they won't want to release him to us."

"How'd you trace him here?"

Pedley told him about Vera and the stencil mark on the uniform. "My opinion, she wangled a job here so she could act as a pipe line to his lawyer, his sister, maybe to his son, too. Now, unless Interpol is allowing its female operatives

to latch up with prisoners, we can discard these." He spread nine cards on the table. "All man-and-wife registrations."

"It'll establish a new record for legality if the ratio runs that high." Russ fished in the brief case again.

"All right, male and female, wedded or no; we can eliminate them." He stripped four more from the deck. "Also these. All four registered for more than a fortnight; Interpol wouldn't have been holding our man that long. They'd have let him go, indicted him or filed extradition papers before this. Leaves these three; hop in to the Accounting division, get the bills on them."

"Have you cleared the way for such delving into detail?"

Pedley mentioned the name of the assistant manager. "What I want are outgoing phone calls, if any—and room service charges with dates. If Stavro is a virtual prisoner, he'll be eating his meals in his room."

"You be right here?"

"At the bell captain's desk."

The captain on duty was dubious about letting the Marshal examine entries on the bell ledger but was persuaded. Bellmen on one of the three shifts had, at various times, delivered newspapers, drugstore sundries and cigarettes to room 2759. There were no entries, aside from the original rooming notation of luggage handled, for 2766. For 2768, the last of Pedley's cards, there were more than a dozen notations covering the past three days: cigars, theater tickets, flowers, liquor, packages delivered from Bonwit's and The Tailored Woman.

Don't think our man would be making purchases of ladies' clothing or flowers; those theater tickets don't sound right for an Interpol prisoner and his guard. "What do you know about the guest in twenty-seven fifty-nine, Captain?"

"That's the suite on the Broadway corner, Mr. Leski, yuh." Interest flickered in the bell captain's canny eyes.

"Big shot from the Coast. Gets the San Francisco papers. High-wide tipper. Watches the ball games on TV, nuts about the Giants. Maybe the night side would know more about him."

"No one else in the suite?"

"Not that I know of. You mean a pair of high heels, like?"

"I'm interested in his visitors, if any."

"Can't prove anything by me. Might ask one of our key-hole peekers."

"I'll do that." But Pedley had no intention of ringing in any house detective on the hunt; he waited for his deputy to return; asked: "Lot of room service charges for the fifty-nine-sixty suite, Russ?"

"A hundred and forty-seven dollars' worth to date; those gents don't spare the expense account; steaks and prime ribs and lobster Saracen, whatever that is. Connoisseurs of wine, too; at least they pick the high-priced—"

Pedley cut in: "Meals served for two?"

"I wouldn't think one customer could take care of two grapefruit, two bowls of cereal, two orders of eggs Benedict and four pots of coffee every A.M." Russ read aloud from the card: "Leski, Thomas F., Bankers Club, San Francisco. Rooms twenty-seven fifty-nine, twenty-seven sixty, rate, thirty-eight *per diem* plus tax." He waggled the card. "He's good for it, according to Accounting."

"Let's go, boy."

In the corridor on the twenty-seventh, Pedley said: "Sixty will be the bedroom, by the plan they use to show fire exits. You camp outside sixty. I'll go in fifty-nine."

THIRTEEN

His right hand was still raised to repeat the first knock he had made when the door was jerked open, a shirt-sleeved arm shot out, fingers seized his necktie just below the knot. Instantly, he was forcibly hauled into the room—into hard contact with a tall, paunchy, middle-aged individual with the phlegmatic, fleshy features and the cold, skeptical eyes of the retired police officer. The man's voice was that of one used to demanding obedience.

"Keep your dukes where I can see 'em. Let's have a peek at what's in your pockets."

Pedley growled, irritably: "I wouldn't have needed a gun to spoil your appetite for lunch, Leski. All it would have taken would have been a knee to the pit of your belly. That tie-yanking technique might have worked back when you were giving drunks the bum's rush. If you tried it on a hood nowadays, all it would get you would be a slug in the guts."

Leski did not protest the point; he was examining the badge in Pedley's billfold. "Chief Fire Marshal? Just think of that! And I nearly flang you on your face! I'd apologize, only—" the skeptical eyes looked him up and down—"how do I know you're the lawful owner of this buzzer?" He snapped a finger against the badge.

Pedley was scornful. "Don't tell me Interpol pays you a salary on the assumption you're a detective." He thrust his

chin suddenly at the other. "Where do you think I got these burns? Cooking hamburgers? Where's Stavro?"

"No sense getting sore, Marshal. I have to be careful."

"All right. You've been careful." Pedley glanced at the closed door to the bedroom. "Produce your prisoner." He surveyed the living room of the suite for some indication of double occupancy but none was apparent. The pile of San Francisco *Chronicles* on the sofa, the television set—at the moment showing a color sequence of cookie manufacture—a card table spread with a pyramidal pattern of solitaire, a box of cellophane-wrapped Tampa Nuggets, a room-service table with dirty silver and dishes. But only one plate, one toast-warmer, one coffeepot, a single cup.

Leski peeled the wrapper from a Nugget. "Mind telling me a couple of things, Marshal?"

"Such as . . . ?"

"Where'd you get your information? About me being an operative for Interpol?"

"From Stavro's lawyer. Pendiff."

"Oh. And did he tell you that Mr. Stavro is being held on a warrant of extradition?"

"No. Wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference if he had."

"Makes a difference to me, Marshal." Leski lit the cigar, puffed once, blew a funnel of gray smoke in Pedley's direction. "I'm under strict instructions not to permit anyone to interview my prisoner. That goes for anyone from the Police Commissioner down . . . and I can make it stick."

"Don't you read anything but the San Francisco papers?" Pedley pointed to the television set. "Don't you listen to news on that?"

The Interpol man gazed at him steadily, chewing on the cigar, waiting.

"There was a fire uptown this morning, Leski. Burned a hundred people out of their homes. Killed a fireman."

Leski blinked. "Too bad, thing like that."

"Stavro's mother died in that blaze."

"Now that *is* too bad. He wouldn't know about it. I'll have to get the evening papers, break it to him."

"He knows about it. He was up there at his mother's last night."

"I been rude to you once, Marshal," Leski said. "Don't like to have to be rude again by contradicting you. But my prisoner hasn't been out of this suite for three days and nights."

"Don't bet your job on it. I can show you depositions from several people who know Stavro well, who swear he was up there around nine last night."

"Trying to stampede me, Marshal?"

"Trying to talk sense through your thick skull. I'm after a mad dog, a murderer who'd as soon kill fifty people as one, a homicidal maniac who doesn't even know the people he kills. You stand there and hand me that line about not allowing anyone to question your prisoner. Well, I'm going to talk to him . . . if he's in that bedroom." He walked to the closed door, turned the knob, found it locked. "I'm none too sure of that. He might be downtown, nuzzling up to his girl, if you let him off the leash way you did last night."

Leski reddened. "You look tuckered, Marshal. You don't look as if you could stand a good poke in the jaw."

"What you better mull over is where you'll stand when I give these depositions to the newspaper boys. How long you think you'll be on the Interpol payroll after someone begins to ask how much it took to bribe you?"

"Goddam, you'd really rile me—except I know he couldn't have been out of this suite last night." Leski jingled

keys, used one on the door of the living-room closet, flung it open. "See why I'm so positive?" He waved at a suit on a hanger, at a pair of men's black oxfords on the floor. The shoes were clearly too small for the detective's feet. "He *couldn't* stir out of here. He doesn't have a stitch of clothing outside his shorts and undershirt and socks."

The Marshal's smile was half sneer. "And you keep the bedroom door locked and the corridor door to twenty-seven sixty locked. And you think he can't get out, can't get clothes and shoes to get out." He stalked to the telephone. "She must have gotten a rise out of you, hah?"

Leski clamped his hand over the Marshal's as it rested on the handset. "Who must have, tough stuff?"

"The floor maid. The one with the roll-in-the-hay look."

Beads of perspiration popped out on Leski's forehead; the skeptical eyes had an ugly glint in them. "Lay off that phone," he snapped. "I'll show *you!*" He hurried to the bedroom door, used his key ring again, swung the door wide.

A short, stout man in a lavender undershirt and peppermint-striped shorts tumbled off an easy chair, went to his knees on the carpet, rolled over out of sight behind the arm of the chair.

Leski ran past him to the bedroom closet, flung the door open.

The man's head rose slowly into sight above the arm of the chair so the knifelike part in the dark hair showed first, then a wide, pale forehead, eyebrows like pencil marks on paper, a pair of frightened eyes.

"You . . . you startled me!" Alex Stavro exclaimed.

Leski peered into the bathroom, emerged, glowering. "If you've been putting one over on me, I'll startle your hair white."

Stavro came out of his crouch; he stared at Pedley. "Who is he?" Thumb and finger tugged nervously at a mustache

so black and waxy that it might have been bought at a costumer's.

"He's from the Fire Department." Leski looked beneath both of the twin beds; he thumped the pillows, felt the mattresses. "He says your ma got burned to death."

Pedley made a correction. "She was killed; killed before the blaze got to her. But her body was burned."

Stavro came to his feet with the slowness of an invalid suffering great pain. "My *mother* . . . ?" he faltered, as if unable to comprehend.

Pedley watched him closely. "You don't need to put on an act. Your lawyer told me you were offering a reward for the conviction of her murderer." He went to the wastebasket by the dresser; there was nothing in the plastic container except some foil from candy bars. "If you want to try out your dramatic ability, start by explaining to your guard, here, how you happened to be up at your mother's house last night around nine." There were no newspapers in the room, no books or television set, nothing except a pocket-sized chess set on the night table between the twin beds. But—he tilted his head back to listen—there was soft music somewhere near. There was no wall-set in the room.

Leski pulled out the dresser drawers, slamming each one back into place angrily. "I tell him you never stirred out of this suite, Stavro. *You* tell him."

"Maybe he can explain—" the Marshal picked up the telephone beside the chess set—"how his attorney conferred with him this morning. This instrument has been disconnected."

Stavro clapped a hand over his mouth as if to make sure he would not say the wrong thing.

Leski pulled the dresser out from the wall, looked behind it. "I say nobody conferred with you, Stavro. Now, call me a liar."

"Perhaps the maid did the conferring." Pedley went to the big chair in which Stavro had been sitting. "She looks as if she could confer a few favors, if so inclined."

Stavro echoed: "The maid . . . ?" but his show of surprise was not convincing.

Leski advanced on him, menacingly. "She brought you a suit and shoes and a shirt and stuff, hidden in that goddam linen cart, was that how it worked, Stavro?"

The Marshal reached down behind the seat cushion of the overstuffed chair, brought up a small transistor radio about the size of a pack of cigarettes.

The whompety-whomp of a rock-and-roll combo swelled and ceased; an announcer heralded "the news that's live at fifty-five":

First the headlines: President meets with security council. Tanker in collision in Boston harbor. Giant space rocket fails at Canaveral. Brutal slaying in midtown Manhattan. If YOU suffer from sensitive stomach after OVERindulging . . .

Pedley said: "No news, hah?"

Leski said: "Where'd you get that radio? That goddam maid?"

The stout man retreated to the bathroom door. Leski followed, cursing. There were sounds of a scuffle.

The Marshal scowled down at the midget set in his hand. From it the newscaster's voice came clearly:

. . . discovered the body of Laurence Foster beneath a pile of rubbish in an alley off West Seventy-sixth Street. First reports indicate that Foster had been bludgeoned to death with a hammer or piece of pipe. The victim had been a member of the New York City Fire Department for nine years. A special detail of police is combing the area but no suspects have as yet been arrested. In Washington this morning . . .

FOURTEEN

The livid strip of scar tissue on the Marshal's jaw—a memento of that long-ago night when the tillerman on Ladder Twelve had rescued Barney Malloy from beneath a glowing-red floor beam—stood out against the leathery skin as starkly white as a bit of exposed bone. "Leski," he said quietly, "open this corridor door."

There were men serving sentences in various institutions of incarceration who could have told the Interpol detective, from bitter personal experience, that Pedley in such a mood was best handled gingerly as a fulminate cap. But Leski was preoccupied with his prisoner, paid no attention to the danger signal. "Think I'm going to give this slippery snake a chance to wiggle loose again?"

The Marshal put the transistor set on the bureau. "The chance you gave Stavro last night probably cost the lives of two of our boys. If you want to keep on drawing pay from Interpol, don't stand in my way. Just do as I tell you; skip the back talk."

Leski stared. He made mumbling sounds about being responsible to his superiors, but he read the signs aright and hastily used his key.

Russ Drake, who had been listening outside, stepped quickly into the bedroom, his right hand in a precautionary position beneath his left lapel. "Trouble, Chief?"

"Just heard." The Marshal touched the tiny radio. "On

this. They found Larry Foster, beaten to death in the alley near Ladder Fifty-eight."

"No!" Russ eyed the Interpol man coldly. "Pete Arnette's buddy? What is this—a chain reaction?" He removed his hand from the butt of the gun in his shoulder holster.

"Killer figured Larry came out of that Little Italy tenement with something besides Pete's body. Decided Larry'd taken the hot bills Stavro'd stashed in his mother's rooms. Wouldn't surprise me if this weasel—" Pedley strode to the bathroom, dragged Stavro out into the bedroom—"recovered the loot himself when he was at his mother's place last night. If so, it puts him in the clear on Larry Foster's murder but makes him liable for Pete Arnette's death. Person who latched onto that hideaway packet set the fire to cover the old woman's torture." He flung the fat man against the bed.

Stavro held a towel to his face; evidently he had been stanching a nosebleed caused by Leski's ministrations. "You sick in the skull, mister? Saying I hurt my own *mother*?!" He snarled deep in his throat, teeth bared, head hunched forward on his thick neck. "Nobody says this to Stavro."

"Suppose I say it?" Pedley retorted. "You went up to her tenement last night to get the loot from that bank job. Neighbors heard a lot of screaming and shouting and thumping around. You'd have a tough time convincing a jury you didn't use a lighted cigar to persuade your mother to give back the dough she'd hidden for you."

Stavro made a guttural sound. "Maybe you did that to your mother, you—"

"That'll be all from you." Pedley gestured brusquely to the Interpol man. "Take him in the living room. Don't slap him around. If there's going to be any more of that, I'll take care of it." He shut the living-room door behind them.

Russ scowled. "Little man have connections with the Mafia? Or who does his butchering?"

"Never heard of the syndicate resorting to arson."

"You mentioned torture. That's down their alley, Chief."

"Sometimes. But this wasn't a kill meant to serve as an object lesson to keep the rest of the mob in line. This was strictly murder for money, with arson added as a coverup."

The deputy had worked with the Marshal long enough to know that Pedley sometimes seemed to possess what psychologists, for want of a more precise term, call extra-sensory perception, in matters concerning the criminal setting of fires. "You don't think Stavro had a hand in fixing Larry Foster's wagon?"

"No. His girl may have been involved, Russ."

"The sexpot maid? Polly Ryan?"

"Real tag is Vera Fassler. Lives at one seventy-four and a half West Twenty-fifth."

Russ made a note.

"Go get her. Run her down to the office as a material witness. And don't forget, this chick is really high voltage."

"I'll be extra careful, Chief. You know how easily shocked I am. Do I search her residence?"

"Wouldn't do any good. If she got the stuff or if it was turned over to her for safekeeping, she wouldn't have it where the Interpol people could find it with a search-and-seizure warrant. By the way, she has a Negro maid, puts on the ol' Southern mammy act; wouldn't let her get behind you with a carving knife."

"This sounds like an attractive assignment, Chief. After I bring her in, do I wait at the office for you?"

"No. Turn Miss Fassler over to Barney. Then hop back here. I want to be sure Stavro doesn't keep in touch with his son or vice versa."

Russ said, "And you wouldn't trust this Interpol poop to keep a canary caged. See what you mean." He left.

Pedley went into the living room.

Stavro slumped on the sofa, bent over, elbows on knees, face in hands. He didn't look up when the Marshal spoke to Leski:

"You can lock the corridor door now—and stay in the bedroom."

"Goddam it, Marshal, you order me around like a bell-boy."

"A bellboy would have been too smart to fall for that maid's twitching her tail around."

"Listen, goddamit—"

"Shut up. We're taking this Polly into custody. We may have to send her away; she'll be afraid of that. So she'll make a deposition. If she gives the lowdown on her relations with you, it'll make damned interesting reading for your Paris headquarters. Go on. Get out. Stay out till I tell you to come back."

The Interpol man struggled to appear insulted but it was a feeble attempt. When he closed the bedroom door behind him, Stavro lifted his head.

"I don't suppose it'll do any good to say so, because you got me marked lousy anyhow, but just the same I'm sorry about those firemen."

"Sorry!" Pedley echoed harshly.

"You think I had something to do with their getting killed; you're sore; I don't blame you—" the fat man spread his palms in mute appeal—"but you got me dead wrong."

"I have you dead to rights," Pedley said, stonily. "You talk as if you're sorry but you're only scared pissless. Because you know your partner in that bank stickup thinks you've cheated him out of his split; he'll get you for it. Frankie the Actor didn't recover that hot dough, else Larry

Foster wouldn't have been murdered. The party who killed Foster thought the fireman had found the loot in the burning tenement."

"Well, hell," Stavro cried, "he *might* have!"

"If he'd found it, he'd have turned it in. Anyone with a flea's brain ought to realize that the kind of man who'd risk his life a dozen times a week for a fireman's paycheck wouldn't be the kind to steal anything from anybody. If he was dishonest, to begin with he'd have taken up some different line of work. If he could be tempted by a wad of hot money he'd have been tempted long before by jewelry or silver or personal belongings in someone's home and he'd have been found out and tossed out of the Fire Department."

Stavro said, "To hear you tell it."

"That's the way it is," Pedley retorted. "But the person who beat out Larry Foster's brains didn't have sense enough to realize that. All he could think of was that someone had taken that bunch of hot bills. And now that the killer knows Foster didn't have the money on him, he'll assume you got it when you were at your mother's, so he'll come after you."

"He might," Stavro admitted. "But he'd make the same mistake you're making. You got a preconceived notion; you won't believe anything I tell you."

"I might. Get it right, Stavro; I'm not concerned about the bank robbery or the stuff you stole or the guard who was shot or anything except the identity of the individual who set fire to that tenement last night."

"That, I swear on a stack of Bibles, I did not do." The fat man wiped blood off his lip. "I tell you the absolute God's honest truth; I did go to Mamma's to get back my little cache so as to be able to dicker with this Interpol bastard for a light sentence."

"How much did you have to dicker with?"

"Two hundred fifty thousand."

"Cash?" Pedley remembered the hundred-thousand-dollar figure from the headlines.

"No. One hundred ten thousand in new banknotes, mostly twenties, fifties and hundreds. Balance in negotiable bonds, some municipal securities but part whiskey-company debentures, distillers' securities. Good as gold, once out of the country." Stavro sighed. "You had it right. I gave the whole take to Mamma. She promised to give it back to me and nobody else. But when I ask her for it yesterday, she says no, she won't give it to me."

"Why not?"

"First, I think Mamma's out of her mind, crazy with worry or something. But no, she cries her eyes out but she explains it's because of my son." Stavro gazed at the figures of the carpeting as if searching for some more rational reason for the incredible refusal on his mother's part. "My son, Rik; a fine boy. He thinks a lot of me, you know."

"Phony hero worship." Pedley made it a query. "My pop's a big shot. He may be a crook but he rides it rich. He's smart; he gets his without working. To him you're a glamour guy."

"That's it. I maybe spoiled him, few times I had anything at all to do with him. Presents, you know. Stuff his mother couldn't afford to buy him. But Mamma hated the idea Rik should admire me at all. To her I should have been the horrible example."

"A corrupting influence on her grandson."

Stavro glanced up, startled. "Funny. That's just the word she used. Corrupting. Said maybe if I got a good stiff sentence and went to prison for a real long term, Rik wouldn't think so much of me. Then maybe he'd straighten up and fly right, without my evil example." He shook his head,

still unable to believe it. "So she wouldn't turn the money over to me; she knew I wanted to use it to bargain for a light sentence."

"And you tortured her, to make her tell you where she'd hidden this quarter-million?"

Stavro stood up. "Listen, son of a bitch." He lowered his head, a pudgy bull getting set to charge. "You call me anything you want, maybe you'll be pretty near right. But don't say Stavro tortured his mamma, because I'll get you for this if I don't live five minutes afterward, understand?"

Pedley said, "If you didn't burn her with that lighted cigar, you have a pretty good idea who did."

"Maybe I have." Stavro came toward him until his face was only inches from the Marshal's. "But I settle my own account. I'll fix that party myself."

FIFTEEN

"Very touching, this determination to avenge your mother." Pedley pushed the man aside, went to the phone table. "Very unconvincing. You're not likely to be where you can take revenge on anyone, for a while."

"I'm not out of circulation yet." Stavro was sullen. "And if I do get put inside, I'll have friends outside who'll go to hell for me, if I ask 'em to."

"This vendetta attitude doesn't match up with the reward Pendiff offered. I expect you put up the ten thousand to put across the idea that you couldn't possibly have killed your mother. Know how the prosecutor'll look at it? You quarreled with her. And you were the last person known to have been with your mother before she was found murdered in her bed."

"She was alive when I left her; want me to take a lie detector test on it?"

"They'll probably get around to that. If you didn't actually do away with her yourself, you claim you know who did."

"An' I'll settle that account myself."

"You sent your sister over there in the afternoon; that means you don't think she was the torturer."

"Won't do a damn bit of good to needle me."

"Who else, besides you and your sister, knew where the bonds and the cash were hidden? Vera Fassler?"

"Do I look like an absolute idiot?" Stavro's lip curled

scornfully. "She is a friend, yeah, only not exactly the kind of friend a man trusts with that big a dollar. After all, she's . . . well, she's—"

"A *poule de luxe*," Pedley cut in. "A high-class whore. She puts on a good display; she sells her merchandise at top prices. Maybe she gives some of it away to your son."

"*You bastard!*" There was no pretense about Stavro's resentment this time. "She's barely met Rik."

"Neat way to put it. He knows her well enough to ask her to let him stay overnight at her house."

"You say this to make me blow my top."

"I heard it from her. Could be he wanted to bed down with her badly enough to suggest a split. Or at least a fancy payoff, since if he could force his grandmother to reveal the hiding place, it wouldn't have been his money he'd have been cutting up, anyhow."

"So maybe my son does get hot pants once in a while. That's not unnatural. What would be unnatural would be for Rik to double-cross his father. It would be inhuman." Stavro flopped into an easy chair, clutching at the upholstered arms as if to steady himself.

"He went over to Little Italy in the middle of the afternoon. He had no luck, then, in persuading her to turn over the stuff, but he went back later. On the second trip he took along a kit of burglar's tools, implements that could have been used to pry a medicine cabinet off the bathroom wall."

"Even if I heard Rik confess, I wouldn't believe he had anything to do with it. You're wasting your breath."

"There's more, Stavro. Your boy may not have managed to dig out the loot on that second trip. But he certainly could have tried to make her talk, might have jabbed that glowing cigar tip against her sensitive skin. The shock would have killed her. There's no doubt in my mind; the

person who did that either set the fire in an attempt to conceal the murder or possibly got panicky on discovering the old lady had died and simply ran away, leaving the mattress burning—which would have touched off the whole building in a matter of minutes.”

“You think my son smokes cigars, at his age!”

“The cigar may have been intended to mislead. There’s still more, Stavro. A hook-and-ladderman was killed there in your mother’s tenement. A buddy of his lugged the body to the street. Your son was there; he saw the dead man and the rescuer. This morning that other fireman, Larry Foster, was murdered—by someone who figured Foster had taken your cache from behind the medicine cabinet. The only person who knew Foster had been in your mother’s rooms was your boy.”

Stavro panted like a hound on a hot day.

“One more point,” Pedley went on. “I searched your son when I nabbed him outside the burning tenement. He was toting around a yellow sock that had been filled with sand for use as a sap, the sort of weapon that might have bashed out Foster’s brains.”

“If you caught Rik, he couldn’t have been where he could have clobbered this fireman.”

“He got away. And while it’s likely enough he tortured his grandmother to death and either set the fire or let it get going, it’s a cinch he didn’t glom onto that quarter-million. Who did? Your cagey attorney?”

“Are you going to name all your suspects and expect me to say ‘yes’ when you hit the right one? How foolish can you get!”

“Pendiff might have decided it would be smarter to grab all the swag instead of taking a small cut as his fee.”

“First it’s my son who’s guilty, then my lawyer—”

“How about your wife?”

Stavro glowered balefully but said nothing.

"The Grand Jury might bring in a true bill against Miss Tedder."

"We ain't divorced. Her name is Stavro."

"She doesn't seem to like it much. Anyhow, see what the D.A. could make of this. She certainly knew you were mixed up with Frankie the Actor, probably knew you were in on that bank job. Having had some experience with your devious ways of doing business, she could easily have figured you'd get your mother to act as temporary custodian of the stolen funds. Now, a woman turned in the alarm for that fire, phoned it in and hung up fast."

"Maybe you got your finger on something." The fat man sneered. "Kay hates me an' had no use for Mamma. If I could bring myself to believe she had guts enough to do a terrible thing like that . . . but it's impossible. I can't. Kay's so squeamish she couldn't so much as bring herself to squash a roach; besides, she's an absolute coward."

"Arson's a coward's crime," the Marshal pointed out. "Anyone with murder in his heart and a match in his fingers can burn down a block and cremate a lot of innocent people. A woman was seen hurrying out of your mother's tenement about five minutes before the apparatus responded to the blaze; a man in the house across the street got a good look at her. She was wearing a fur neckpiece, a stole. Happen to know if Miss Tedder owns one?"

"What my wife wears," Stavro said hoarsely, "I wouldn't know. I don't buy her clothes."

"We can check on that. She may have been away from her apartment at the time of the fire; we'll find out about that, too. One thing sure, she wasn't at the Varamista at the time Larry Foster was waylaid in an alley and beaten to death."

"I won't kid you." Stavro seemed to have difficulty

breathing again. "If you could prove it on her, I wouldn't have one sorry minute about it. But she wouldn't have had the guts to do a thing like that."

"Leaves only your partner, then. Frank Kolz."

"Suppose I said 'Yeah, I think it was Frankie.' Where would that get you? The Feds been after him for months; they haven't been able to catch him. You wouldn't do any better."

"Might, with your help. With what you know about his friends, his habits." Pedley dialed the Bureau.

"He hasn't any friends. An' he changes his habits like he switches his wigs. Cigarettes one day, cigars the next. Gold-rim specs on Wednesday, contact lenses Thursday. Only thing I can tell you about Frankie, he'll show up when you least expect him." Stavro sighed gloomily.

Barney came on the line; Pedley said, "I'm in suite twenty-seven fifty-nine and sixty at the Saracen. Russ call in?"

"Just to say he was on his way to the Fassler dame's house. But this line's really been sizzling. Commissioner is about to pop his safety valve, wants you at his office at one sharp."

"To be the goat at a press conference?"

"That wasn't the way he put it," Barney said. "Seems the evening editions are going to scream about the Bureau's failure to call in competent police assistance on the Little Italy case. Idea seems to be that by trying to go it alone, we're responsible for what happened to Larry Foster."

"Yair. If the police had been handling it, the firebug would have been in custody in an hour, I suppose. All right, tell the big brass I'll be down directly."

"Better say y' reckon, boss. You're wanted at the Varamista on a matter of extreme urgency."

"Shaner?"

"Rang up, half an hour ago, in a sweatin' swivet. He's on the board, trying to dope out some way to take five to answer the call of nature when the light flashes over the Sixteen-B plug. He jacks in, hears a woman yell 'Help!' and a screech, then no more. So he hotfoots up. The door to Miss Tedder's apartment is open. She's lying on the floor in her foyer, out cold."

"Don't be cryptic."

"Not dead. Just kayoed. But all battered and bunged up, mouth bleeding, so on. And in a daze. Shaner couldn't get much out of her, except that the guy who slugged her was a truant officer."

"Frankie. He got away."

"Went down in the elevator as Ed was streaking up the stairs."

"Ed ought to have his head examined. Did he call a doctor for her?"

"Sure. Medico hadn't arrived at the time Ed reported to me."

"You were right, Barno. I should have said 'I reckon.' Inform the grand panjandrum that I'll be a little late for his get-together with the newspaper boys. And ring Ed, tell him I'm on my way."

SIXTEEN

Pedley called Leski. "From here on in you may not have to watch your prisoner quite so carefully. Stavro's partner in crime, who feels he's been gypped out of his share in that bank haul, may be prowling around outside."

"I'm supposed to relax," asked Leski, "with a killer patrolling the corridor?"

Stavro spread his hands, palms up. "I'm as good as dead if you keep me cooped up in this hotel. Frankie'll find a way to get in here."

"He won't," Leski promised. "And you won't get out if I have to strip you and park you in the tub."

"Where I'd be a sitting duck!" the fat man groaned.

Pedley went to the hall door. "Don't forget, this Actor wears wigs."

"I know his record and his rep." The Interpol man compressed his lips to a slit registering determination. "I guarantee I won't be taken in by any fake bellboy delivering a phony telegram or a room-service waiter with a foreign accent."

Pedley smiled tautly. "Ever occur to you that a disguise artist might dress up like a woman? Better be careful not to make a pass at the next floor maid who wanders in here. And another thing, if Stavro's son comes around, don't try to keep him out. Let him in."

"*Wait a minute,*" Leski protested. "I have my orders—"

"That's one of them." Pedley opened the door a few inches, peered up and down the corridor. "Let Rik in and

keep him here until I get back. That's an order and it's official. Don't argue about it." He went out.

A funeral cortege—the motorcycle escort, the shiny black hearse, the procession of slow-moving Cadillacs and Lincolns—held him up at Columbus Circle long enough for him to reflect unhappily on his responsibility in the death of Larry Foster. At the least, he should have warned the ladderman of the possibility of an attack; it had been clear, even at the time he'd breakfasted at the firehouse, that Rik was desperate to get his hands on the hoard. It should have been plain enough that Frankie the Actor might have the same misconception the boy had—that if no one had succeeded in prying the quarter-million out from under Mamma Carlotta's watchdog eye, then the most probable finder of the stolen funds was the firemen who had been in the tenement.

Failing to warn Foster, Pedley told himself, it would have been a sensible precaution to have one of his deputy marshals stand guard over Foster until the firebug had been caught and the loot recovered. It was second-guessing, of course, yet he couldn't escape the feeling that he had been negligent—that Larry Foster might be alive if only he had been more careful.

The oversight, he reflected, carried its own built-in penalty. Foster's murderer, failing to find the hot bills on the ladderman's body, would quite likely assume that the money had been taken by the only other member of the Fire Department known to have been in Mamma Carlotta's rooms, and would probably put B. Pedley next on his list.

In the lobby of the Varamista, a lanky, white-haired man, with a thin face and a cleft chin, sat in an undertaker's folding chair beside Shaner at the switchboard.

"Mr. Danahey, here—" Ed made a backhanded intro-

duction—"thinks I'm doing a crummy job on this board, coach."

Danahey sniffed. "You got no business being here at all. I been given no instructions to let you do my work. You don't know how to do it, anyhow, because you're not familiar with the tenants. An' you been listening in on the conversations, which is against regulations and illegal."

Pedley inspected him thoughtfully. "What's eating you? Is Stavro paying you to make a report about calls on his wife's phone?"

"I'm paid by the owners," Danahey said resentfully, "to sit at this board, and by no one else. I've notified the police and we'll soon enough find out if you firemen can run roughshod over honest citizens trying to do the decent thing."

"He repeats this," Shaner said wearily, "every five minutes like a broken phonograph record. I'm about ready to hand him a decent pop in the snoot."

"Hand over your seat, instead," the Marshal suggested. "Come on up to Miss Tedder's. Is the doctor still with her?"

"Left about ten minutes ago." Shaner stood up, stretched, waved sardonically at the tangle of cords and plugs. "All yours, Mister Danahey. Have fun."

In the elevator Pedley asked: "Did Danahey get a good look at this alleged truant officer when he came down from Sixteen-B?"

"Yep. Checks with the description of Frankie Kolz on the Federal flyer Barney has, far as height and weight and build go. Turns out he wasn't claiming to be a truant officer but a parole officer working out of Juvenile Court. Young Stavro has been on parole for some time, and violating it right along apparently. So Miss Tedder didn't suspect any-

thing when the guy said he was from Juvenile Court and she let him in." He pushed the 16B buzzer.

They waited a couple of minutes, buzzed again.

"Who is it?" inquired a timid feminine voice.

"Shaner."

A crisscross of plastic bandages at a corner of her mouth made her face seem haggard and affected her speech. "The doctor gave me something to make me sleep, gentlemen; I'm afraid I won't be able to make much sense."

Pedley followed her to the living room. "We won't keep you long. Was this bruiser trying to get you to tell him where your son is?"

"Oh, no. I told him first off that Rik wasn't home." She had taken off her dress but, beneath a terry bathrobe, was still wearing her slip. She curled up sideways in a chair with the unbandaged side of her face against the back. "I think he must have known Rik wasn't here because right away he asked which was my son's bedroom and began to search it, giving some vague explanation about the recovery of property Rik was supposed to have stolen. As soon as I saw he really was hunting for some particular thing—the way he pulled the bedding apart and poked at the mattress—I was sure he wasn't a real parole officer. So I ran to the phone to call for help. He came after me and struck me on the mouth and knocked me down. That's the last thing I knew until I came to on the bed in my room with Mr. Shaner rubbing an ice-cube on my forehead."

"Remember anything the fellow said?" Pedley's tone was sympathetic.

"He swore at me, that's all."

"Didn't say what he was hunting for?"

"No."

"Or ask where it might be hidden?"

"No. What is it that Rik is supposed to have hidden here?"

"Proceeds of a bank robbery. Your ex-husband and this bruiser who beat you up engineered a holdup and got away with a fortune in bills and bonds. If your boy got hold of that swag, he may have brought it here for safekeeping."

"I doubt that," she said drowsily. "Rik's like his father; he never does things the simple, straightforward way when he can think of something devious. Much more likely for him to have buried the money in Central Park or put it in a checking locker at one of the terminals. He'd never have done anything so obvious as to bring it home with him." She closed her eyes.

"Apparently this masquerader thinks he did. He's badly wanted by the police; he ran a big risk coming here; he's the sort of character who'll try it again." Pedley put his hand on her shoulder.

She opened her eyes with an effort. "You mean he'll come back here?"

"I'd say so."

"Next time he'll probably kill me." She was fighting against the drug to stay awake.

"Shaner will see to it that he doesn't, Miss Tedder."

She struggled to sit erect, her eyelids leaden, her voice thick with fatigue. "You are laying a trap for him; I'm to be the bait!"

"You'll be safer here in your own home, with Ed Shaner guarding you, than anywhere else."

Ed said, "You mean I'm to camp out here for the duration?"

Kay Tedder's head slumped forward; she mumbled, "A man in my apartment, day and night? Oh, no . . ." she slid sideways, would have fallen to the floor if Pedley had not caught her in time.

"Here, Ed." He held the limp figure out to Shaner. "She's your baby. You put her to bed."

"Ah, now, coach—what kind of an assignment you giving me?"

"Easiest one you ever had. Nothing to do but keep your eyes and ears open until we round up Frankie. Plenty of food in the refrigerator, comfortable chairs to nap in . . ."

"But Miss Tedder—"

"Will get used to you and like it." Pedley went to the hall closet, looked around. "Whether she does or not, you're staying." There was no fur piece in the closet.

He followed Shaner as the deputy deposited his burden on the bed. "It wouldn't astonish me greatly if Frankie the Actor had the right slant on this business." He opened the bedroom closet, peered at dresses and coats on crowded hangers, lifted his head and sniffed, drawing in his breath in quick, questing inhalations like a boy at the kitchen door when the oven is open.

Shaner watched him silently until the Marshal closed the closet door. "You going to notify Danahey I'm staying in her apartment?"

"You tell him." There was a faraway look in the Marshal's eyes. "And give Barney a buzz. Say the conference will have to be postponed a little longer. Ask him to tell the Commissioner I'm engaged on what the legal sharps call a hot pursuit."

SEVENTEEN

Ed Shaner bent over the bed, felt Kay Tedder's pulse. "What do I do with this babe when she wakes up?"

"Watch her." Pedley opened her snakeskin clutch bag. "And don't count on her being as sleepy as she seems. Might be putting on an act again, way she did when I came over here right after the fire." He strewed the contents of the handbag on her vanity. "She was in her nightclothes then; her hair was all mussed up as if she'd just been roused out of deep sleep. Yet she had been over at Little Italy within the hour. The suit she wore over there still reeks of smoke; it's hanging in her closet; you can smell the fire on it."

"She torched off her mamma-in-law's place?"

"No way to be sure of that until we find the party who got the loot. Miss Tedder may have gone over there after the old lady had undergone her trial by fire. In that case the place may already have been ablaze. On the other hand, she might have had a bedside chat with Mamma Carlotta and convinced her that it would be best to reveal where the stolen stuff had been hidden. So . . . search these rooms as if you were collecting dust for a microscopic examination."

"I'll leave no smallest packet of frozen food in her freezer unopened."

"Never mind the refrigerator. Start with the furniture. She's an interior decorator. She'd know how to rip open

the upholstery, stuff a bundle of bills and bonds inside and sew it up again so the ordinary person would never suspect it." Pedley pushed aside the silver lipstick, the platinum compact, the small gold pillbox and the lighter with K.T. set in chip diamonds.

He sniffed at the perfume on a lacy handkerchief, inspected a pocket checkbook on the National City Bank, jingled the keys on a ring with a jade lucky charm. Then he opened her billfold.

Besides forty dollars—he frowned as he fingered the crackly new bills—there were half a dozen business cards: cards of fabric wholesalers, Oriental rug importers, dealers in antiques. In another pocket were Diners' Club and Carte Blanc cards, also a driver's license with a vehicle registration card for a 1961 Renault, cream-colored. "Say, Ed."

Shaner, squatting in front of an open bureau drawer, looked up.

"Told me Miss Tedder took a cab after she toted that suitcase out of here."

"She did. A Yellow. I made a note of the license number, case we want to interrogate the hackie."

Pedley wagged the car registration. "Wonder why she didn't have her Renault sent around? Know where she keeps it?"

"She hasn't called any garage while I've been on the board. Maybe Danahey would know."

"Yair." The Marshal put the things back in the clutch bag. "Ask Barney to check her credit standing at National City. And keep a sharp eye out for young Stavro. He'll have a key. If he should slip in when you were off guard, you might find out what it feels like to have a switchblade stuck between your shoulders."

"If he's the lad responsible for Pete's getting his neck

broken, it'll take more than an upholstery mender to put him together when I get through with him."

"Don't know whether Rik's the firebug or not, Ed. I said he has a key; should have said he *is* the key."

"Clue me in, coach."

"Kid knows, or thinks he knows, who killed his grandmother, who got the quarter-million. However he may feel about the old lady's murder I can't say, but he's hellbent to get the loot. He wants it to bargain with, to get his father off the hook in that bank stickup."

"Suppose the boy figures his mother is the guilty person?"

"Wouldn't astonish me too much," Pedley admitted. "In any case, it's my guess that if he can't catch up with the party who stole the stuff, or get his hands on the money, then he'll turn over the information he has—or believes he has—to his father's lawyer. Kid probably entertains some cockeyed idea that the attorney could dicker with the D.A. to let Stavro cop a plea on a lesser count than conspiracy to commit murder during an armed robbery."

Shaner pawed over a lilac satin lingerie bag. "Sounds like the Jukes family; son willing to convict his ma to save his pa . . . nice people."

Pedley stared broodingly at the woman on the bed. "When she snaps out of it, don't let her get too close to an open window, Ed." He went out and down the stairs.

The man at the switchboard stared at him sullenly.

"Know where Miss Tedder keeps her little French car, Danahey?"

"Garage on Columbus Avenue. Parkere, near Seventy-fifth. Why?"

"You ever run it over there for her?"

"Once in a while, when it's bad weather and I'm going

off duty. Generally she drives it over herself an' walks back."

"Was the Renault here when you came on duty this morning?"

"No. An' listen, mister. You're not going to twist anything I say against Miss Tedder. She's as fine a tenant as we have in the Varamista."

"Feel that way about her son, too, Danahey?"

"You want any more dope outa me, you serve me with a subpeeny or whatever; I got my job to do here on the board an' I spent too much time shilly-shalling with you firemen, already."

"We'll let you play with your plugs now." Pedley went out to the Buick.

It was one long block and two short over to Parkere. The sallow-faced, cadaverous garageman in the office was annoyed at the interruption of his television program: "Yuh, the Renault. Upstairs, third floor. I can't let you take it out without Miss Tedder calls pers'nally."

The Marshal showed his badge. "Was the car here when you took over from the night man?"

"Yuh, sure. Ain't been out all day."

"Would you have a record to show if it had been in or out last night?"

"Hell, no. Sime Greiner'd know, but he won't be around until seven. This is a twelve-hour shift, this job."

"All right, I'll see Greiner later. Run me up to the third." Pedley sauntered to a long workbench beneath a festoon of hanging tires. Beside the heavy vise at the end of the bench was an electric grinder with an emery wheel still in place on the arbor.

Along the surface of the bench, at right angles to the face of the wheel, was an irregular line of dark specks, such

as might have been made by spattering of blood from a boy's wrists.

"Want the keys to her bus, Marshal?"

"Yair." As the elevator rose ponderously, Pedley considered the likelihood that a night man who would have let Rik use that grinder to free himself from the handcuffs wouldn't be apt to volunteer much information on the movements, in and out, of the Renault.

"That cream-colored midget there." The garageman pointed. "You want I should wait up here for you?"

"No. I'll be a while." Pedley took the car keys. "Come back up in ten."

"Whatever you say." The elevator descended.

There was nothing on the seats of the Renault, nothing on the tiny shelf in front of the rear window except a couple of road maps and a box of facial tissues. The glove compartment held a carelessly crumpled silk handkerchief, a couple of packs of cigarettes, a miniature bottle of brandy and an address book with *Kay* in gilt script on the pigskin cover.

He flipped through the pages of the little book, was about to tuck it back in the compartment when he noticed purple lettering on the otherwise blank page next the back cover. Neat, hand-penned lettering: COHABET.

Hardly an address, even for a place of assignation, he mused. Not a word that a well-bred woman would be likely to print in her personal memorandum book, much less misspell. He closed the glove compartment but stuck the address book in his pocket.

"*Cohabet!* What the hell?" he muttered to himself as he opened the luggage space and found it bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. He had no better luck with the engine compartment.

He passed the flat of his palm across the slip covers, felt

beneath the dash, finally ran his hand underneath the front seat of the car. His fingers came away from the floor covering smudged with black. Carefully, he repeated the experiment with the same results. Something which had collected a coating of soot had been hidden beneath the front seat since last the car had been vacuumed.

He had finished pasting Bureau of Fire Investigation stickers across the doors of the Renault when the elevator door opened again. "I'm keeping these keys," he explained brusquely to the garageman. "Miss Tedder's car will be impounded by court order as essential evidence in an arson case. You'll get the authorization in the morning. Meantime, nobody's to touch it, understand?"

"What if she calls for it?"

"No dice. Sit tight. See that the car stays put." Pedley's forehead corrugated as his gaze fixed on the printed placard stuck on the side wall of the elevator:

Reliable Delivery *plus* Honest Care
for your Car at all times
P-A-R-K-E-R-E

Special monthly, yearly rates
CO 4-9160

"Tell Sime Greiner what I say, too." Pedley paused by the pay phone on the wall outside the office. "He's not to touch the Renault, make it plain."

"You claim Miss Tedder's one of these pyromaniacs?" The garageman was mystified.

"Not my business to go around accusing people, fella. All I'm supposed to do is investigate. That's what I'm doing." He studied the dial of the pay phone for half a minute before he went out to the Buick, cut in the short-wave set.

"Barney . . . ? Chore."

"Boss, the Commissioner—!"

"Tell the brass to hold his water, Barno. Didn't you pass on the word about the hot pursuit?"

"Sure, but he thinks that's a stall so you won't have to talk to the newsmen. What's the chore?"

"Find out from the phone company who has 'cohabet' for a number."

"Did you say 'cohabit'?"

Pedley spelled it. "With an *e*. Got it? If you follow those letters on the phone dial, they work out to Columbus four, two, two, three, eight."

"Now for God's sake, why would anyone—?"

"Don't know. Want to find out. Rush it."

"Okeechobee, boss, but hold on a sec. I been trying to get Russ."

"Hasn't he brought that Fassler dame in yet?"

"He hasn't even come in. When I tried her number, the operator says her phone's out of order."

E I G H T E E N

"If I'd sent Ed to bring in that bunny," Pedley growled, "it wouldn't have surprised me if he'd taken time out for an intimate interview."

"Russ wouldn't have fallen for any person-to-person routine, boss."

"No. So get through to Captain Gannet again. Ask him to rush a couple of his boys around there, see what the trouble is. I'll be down in a jiffy."

"Meantime, any word for the Commissioner?"

"Not until you get a line on that 'cohabet' number. Hop on it, boy."

"Ha! And hope Russ hasn't done the same. Okay."

Shaner's car had neither siren nor flasher; the Buick wasn't painted red. Yet Pedley ran intersections, ignored red lights as if he'd been driving his own sedan with the big brass bell clanging to clear the way. His sense of urgency was sharpened by the imminent funerals for a couple of good firemen and his determination that there shouldn't be a third death in the Department due to any negligence of Bureau personnel. With one firebug-killer known to be on the loose and perhaps another murderer running wild as well, there was no more margin for error on his part.

Grim lines formed around his mouth as he considered the problem. If the Renault had been used to transport the stolen cash and bonds away from the burning tenement, who had been at the wheel on that trip across town? Had

it been Kay? If so, how had she learned that the swag had been hidden at Mamma Carlotta's; how had she contrived to bring that gruesome treasure hunt to a successful conclusion? Absurd to suppose that, in advance of a midnight meeting, Kay could have had sufficient foresight to provide herself with a cigar for the purpose of applying torture to her son's grandmother.

Yet equally improbable to assume Rik had located the quarter-million and had made his getaway in the Renault, immediately thereafter to return to the fire scene and subsequently to assault Pedley with the ferociousness of a madman on the mere suspicion that the Marshal had the money in his possession. That made no sense at all; Rik would have had no reason to stage a show of violent resentment. Besides, if the boy had managed to free himself from the handcuffs in the Parkere garage, with all that loot right there where he could get his hands on it, surely he wouldn't have made the futile trip to Helen Stavro's in an attempt to get his mother to bring around a suitcase full of clothes.

There was another possibility which had not occurred to the Marshal before. He had been proceeding on the assumption that the fire had been set to cover the torture of the old woman, the theft of the packet from its hiding place, and Mamma Carlotta's death. But what if the torturing, the old lady's dying agonies and the torching of the tenement had taken place *after* that fortune in bills and bonds had been removed from the tenement? What if the grandmother had voluntarily turned over the loot to someone earlier in the evening and had then been unable to convince a subsequent searcher for the loot that it was no longer on the premises?

He was brooding over this speculation when he swung into West Twenty-fifth Street, saw the emergency truck

pulling into the curb in front of Vera Fassler's house. He brought the Buick to a tire-squealing stop a yard behind the rear step of the red truck; the sound made the two firemen wheel about as they stood at the front door.

"Don't seem to be anyone home, Marshal." The older of the pair thumbed the bell-button again, rapped briskly on the door for good measure.

Pedley said, "That green Ford there, just ahead of your truck, belongs to one of my deputies. I'd say he'll still be here."

The younger engineman put his ear to the door. "Nothing stirring, far's I can hear. Want us to get our Quinlan, Marshal?"

"Yair. Hurry it up." Pedley couldn't spot any lilac-colored Cadillac up or down the block, so perhaps the girl wasn't at home. But the presence of Russ's car was disturbing.

They brought the Quinlan forcing tool, set it up quickly between the door frames, threw their weight on the lever which multiplied the sidewise pressure above and below the lock.

"That'll do it." Pedley pushed the knob as the wood made a sharp cracking sound. The door swung wide.

The first thing he saw was the phone. The receiver lay on the floor, between the foyer and the living room, six inches of severed wire trailing across the mouthpiece. "Russ?" he called, crouching to slide in beneath the door forcer.

"Up here, Skipper." The voice was hoarse, faint and far away.

Pedley took the stairs three at a time, one fireman clumping along heavily behind him.

Russ Drake lay on Vera Fassler's bed, propped against pillows, bracing an elbow on the bedspread to keep his

pistol hand up so the barrel could point at the girl. She lounged indolently on the vanity bench, her skirt hiked up sufficiently to display the celebrated legs, a cigarette drooping from a corner of her mouth.

"If it isn't Old Eager Beaver himself!" she exclaimed. "I never thought I'd be glad to see you again, after the revolting way you talked to me, but truth is, I'm delighted."

"So'm I, Skipper." Russ tried a weak smile. "She's all yours." His face was pale with pain. "I couldn't bring her in. But she didn't get away." He let his pistol hand fall to the bedspread, wearily.

"What hit you?" Pedley sat on the side of the bed.

"Aunt Jemima." The deputy raised a hand to point to his chest. "Fell on me. On the stairs. Busted something . . . inside." He paused. "Hard to breathe. Hurts to move. Can't move if I wanted to, anyhow. Broke my tibia, when that tub of lard knocked me tail over teakettle . . . or maybe it's the fibula that's busted . . . I forget which is which." He touched his left thigh. "Knew I had to have a doc. Couldn't trust the wench, there. So sent Aunt Jemima to phone the office. That was . . . hour ago. More."

Vera Fassler cried: "The damn fool wouldn't let me go call a doctor for him. He's been sweating it out like a bear in a trap. I was afraid he'd die before you got here."

Pedley spoke to the fireman. "Hustle the Department ambulance around here, fast as they can make it." He picked up Drake's gun. "Take it easy, Russ. Let her do the talking."

The girl gestured at the deputy with her cigarette. "I'd have had Old Diehard at the hospital long ago if he hadn't threatened to shoot me every time I started to go out to telephone."

The Marshal ran his fingers lightly along the deputy's left leg. There was no blood on the man's trousers so the

broken bone hadn't penetrated the skin, but the leg had clearly been shattered. "Who cut your phone line, Miss Fassler?"

"Why, Rik did." She lifted one shoulder as if to suggest it was what anyone would have done, under the circumstances. "But that was after this hired man of yours tried to force his way into my bedroom. Rik didn't want a radio alarm to go out to the prowl cars before he had a chance to make his getaway."

Russ spoke with evident effort. "Kid was up here with her when I got here. Thought I was after him, natch. First I knew he was in the house was—" He groaned, his head twisted to one side, he was silent.

"Now I'll tell it, the way it actually happened." Vera was scornful. "The doorbell rang downstairs while Rikky Stavro and I were up here in my bedroom discussing a purely personal and private matter. Without any apologies to my maid or showing any warrant, Old Diehard bulled his way into my house. My maid started upstairs, telling him she'd find out if I could see him. That didn't suit him. He pulled a gun like the sheriff in the last reel, shoved it in her back as he followed at her heels on the way upstairs."

Russ coughed softly. "Aunt Jemima never mentioned the kid to me."

"It was none of your nosy business," cried Vera. "I don't blame Rik for thinking you were a gunman sent to kill him, although I admit it was a lousy, lowdown trick for him to push my maid backward down the stairs so she'd fall on you. Rik might have killed *her*."

Russ spoke through clenched teeth. "It was like being flattened by a hook-and-ladder truck running on a first-due schedule, Skipper."

"Anyone would think you were the only one hurt." Vera was shrill. "Anyone would think my maid enjoyed

being pushed head over heels backward, downstairs, and getting the breath knocked out of her. Why, if it hadn't been for the two of us, Old Diehard would still be lying on those stairs, out like a light. All bunged up as she was, she helped me lug him back up here . . . and what thanks did we get? He forced her to bring him his gun—he'd dropped it on the stairs—and believe me, if I'd known he had a couple of cracked ribs or whatever it is he's complaining about, he'd never have gotten hold of that pistol again—and then he made me sit here like a bump on a log while he ordered her to go out and call his lousy old Bureau of Fire Instigation."

Pedley said, "Where was Rik while all this was going on?"

"Where do you think!" She shrugged again, scornfully. "He slid down the banister past that moaning pile-up on the stairs, whipped out his knife, slashed the telephone wire so nobody could call the police . . . and disappeared."

"Did he get what he came for?" Pedley asked.

"Are you being insulting, Eager Beaver?"

"The boy didn't come here this time to get you to pile up in bed with him. He had something more important on his mind."

She smiled, recrossing her legs. "There *is* something more important?"

"He'd have wanted you to give him the key to the suite in the Saracen where his father's being held. The key you used as a hotel employee."

The smile vanished. "You seem to know quite a good deal about my activities."

"You give him that key?"

She took her time about smoothing her skirt over her knees. "If you know all about the hotel, you know I can't go back to my job there. So I can't help my good friend

Mr. Stavro any longer. I thought it was only decent if I turned the key over to Rikky, because certainly he has a right to try to help his father when his father's in trouble."

"What did Rik give you in exchange, Miss Fassler?"

"Why—" her eyes widened, innocently—"what *could* he have given me? He doesn't have anything I want! He certainly doesn't have any money to speak of. Not the kind of money I'm interested in."

"He may," Pedley said, "know where he could get his hands on some."

She gazed at him, unblinkingly. "I wish I thought he did. But I don't, Eager Beaver. Really, I'm positive Rik doesn't know where it is."

NINETEEN

Booted men in black helmets brought a stretcher. A doctor in plain clothes put his black bag on the floor beside Vera Fassler's bed. He made a quick examination of Russ Drake's leg but took quite a while to listen to Russ's painful wheezings. He was professionally reassuring when he took the stethoscopic earpieces off but he took great care in filling his hypodermic and using it and he had the firemen bring up a mask and a portable oxygen tank before he would let them slide the injured man onto the stretcher.

Pedley touched his deputy on the shoulder. "Looks like about thirty days' goldbricking for you."

Russ sighed: "Sorry I let the kid . . . get away."

"Makes us even. Rik got away from me first. But don't worry, we'll catch up with him."

The deputy's eyes flickered toward the girl. "*She* didn't get away, anyhow."

"No. You did all right. I'll put in for a special commendation from the Commissioner. You'll be up and around in time to hear it read and have your picture taken. See you on the shady side of the firehouse, boy."

When the stretcher had been taken down to the hospital car and the siren began its doleful crescendo, Vera said brightly, "Don't mind, I'll take a powder-room break."

"I do mind." Pedley put Russ's gun in his coat pocket. "You'll be at the Bureau in five. You can wait; we have all the facilities there. Come on."

"You're an old meanie! Why do you have to arrest poor li'l ol' Vera? I haven't *done* anything!"

"You were harboring a fugitive from justice, Miss Fessler. That's a felony. Get going. Walk now, talk later."

She was sulky until she saw the damage to her front door. Then she used language that would have corroded a long-shoreman's tongue; she tried desperately to squirm out of his grasp when he finally got her out to the sidewalk.

He put a wristlock on her, brought a look of pain to her face.

But she only laughed mockingly. "I bet you do that to all the girls, Eager Beaver."

"You see a funny side to this? Old woman tortured to death? Fireman killed when somebody tried to cremate her body? Another murdered because your bedtime buddy hid some stolen money and couldn't get hold of it when he wanted to? One of my boys just taken to the hospital because you were rigging up a deal with Stavro's son? Maybe after you've cooled off in a cell for a few days, all that won't seem so comical."

"You're utterly *ridiculous*! I didn't torture anyone or set any fire! I didn't kill anybody or steal anything—yet you're treating *me* like a common *criminal* when actually I can probably help you more than *anyone*."

"Who you offering to double-cross this time? Stavro? Or his son?"

"Oh, if you're determined to be *nasty* . . ."

He had reached Greenwich, was barreling toward Canal at fifty-five, before she spoke again.

"If I tell you where all that money *is*, will you let me go?"

"I'm not after the quarter-million, believe it or not. That's up to the cops or the Federal men. I'm after the person who bonfired that tenement."

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. Depends on whether or not Mamma Carlotta turned over the bundle to someone before the firebug went to her tenement." He did an S-swerve around a refrigerator truck and a Greyhound bus, cornered sharply into Broadway. "I expect you were going to tell me Rik's mother got the money. What the kid thinks, isn't it?"

"Maybe; I don't. Kay may be in a bind financially, but she'd never touch any money that wasn't legally hers. She's too chicken."

"How about Stavro's sister?"

"Helen? You *kidding*?"

"Asking. If she's like her brother, she won't have too many scruples about spending O.P.M. You know her, don't you?"

"Met her, 's all."

"With Stavro?"

"Yes. He took me to the drum where she sings those dirty-diddies—the new risqué parodies and the 'Never trust a sai-lor an inch a-bove the knee' oldies. What a sucker dive!"

"Where is this joint?"

"The Offbeat Club? We passed it, few minutes ago, when you drove through Sheridan Square." Vera flexed the wrist on which he had used leverage. "What a way to make a living! Singalong the smuddy song!"

"Helen's close to her brother?"

"If you mean Alex trusts her, I suppose. Much as he ever trusts anyone. Except that slickjack lawyer." She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes. "Now I'll ask *you* one: have you made Nat Pendiff's acquaintance?"

"Just."

"Then let me tell *you* something . . ." She paused, holding her wrist to her mouth pensively.

"Well, tell."

"Alex went to his mother's place last night. When he sneaked back into the Saracen to meet me so I could let him into the suite again—I guess you know all about that?"

"All I need to know. Go on." He turned off Broadway into Chambers.

"Alex told me he hadn't been able to get what he wanted from Mamma Carlotta. And he was absolutely paralyzed with fear because Frankie the Actor—I guess you know all about Frankie Kolz, too?"

"Not as much as I want to. Keep pouring."

"Frankie'd called Helen Thursday, given her a message for Alex, a deadline, to come up with his half of the bank take. The deadline was last night. Alex couldn't meet it. He knew his number was up. He was practically in a state of collapse because he'd sent both his sister and his son over to plead with Mamma Carlotta—then he'd gone to see her himself and none of them had been able to make her turn loose of the money. He was sure that somehow or other Frankie would find out where he was staying there at the Saracen so Alex would be cold meat before morning."

"And . . . ?"

"I suggested that if things were that bad, he ought to send Nat Pendiff up to Little Italy. After all, an attorney's *supposed* to be expert at convincing people who are hard to convince."

He pulled in beside a No Parking sign, killed the motor. "Did Stavro buy it?"

"What else could he do? Twiddle his thumbs until he got a bullet in the back? Of course he went for it. He asked me to call Pendiff right away." This time she made no attempt to squirm away when he came around the car to take her arm.

Pedley steered her through the vast lobby of the Municipal Building. "Did Pendiff go up there, too?"

"When I spoke to him on the telephone he said he couldn't possibly act as a go-between in a matter involving the disposal of stolen property. Fact, he pretended to be damn sore that I'd even approached him about it. But I'm sure he was just putting on, playing it safe so I wouldn't have anything on him. I noticed he didn't get the indignant note in his voice until after he'd asked me for Mamma Carlotta's address."

"Did he have any alternate suggestion to offer?"

"Oh, yes. It was his bright idea that he should dicker with the Interpol people and have them go to Mamma Carlotta and make a deal direct for turning over the money. But he *sounded* as phony as a vitamin commercial. If he didn't scoot right up there and use all his powers of persuasion on that poor old biddy and wheedle that money out of her, I'll do a strip-nekkid in Macy's window at high noon."

"It's an opinion but it isn't an accusation, Miss Fassler. Not unless you have something to back it up. He might turn the tables and say the same thing about you."

She had no chance to answer for the express elevator rocketed them up to the Bureau's floor.

Barney's head cocked to one side like an inquisitive puppy's as the girl preceded the Marshal into the office.

"Miss Fassler, Barney Malloy. She's to make a deposition before you turn her over to the Detention matron." Pedley took a sheaf of memos from his confidential clerk.

"A deposition?" She gazed helplessly at Barney.

"You dictate a statement—" Barney twisted the knot of his necktie to make sure it was in position—"a sworn statement. You talk to a tape recorder."

"But what *about*?" She was puzzled.

Pedley said, "About everything you've done since three o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Ooh!" She reached out impulsively to touch Barney's

arm. "You wouldn't make a po' li'l country gal reveal anything *embarrassin'*, would you?"

"Barney."

"Yeah, boss?"

"Russ is in Saint Vincent's with a broken leg, some busted ribs and what I'd say were serious injuries because he tried to get this young lady to talk to him."

"See what you mean." Barney's eyes narrowed. "In there, miss." He jerked a thumb toward the small interview room. "Sit down. Wait."

Pedley read the top handwritten memo in the sheaf as he went into his office:

COHABET—Columbus 4-2238
Subscriber is *Habanero Fine Tobaccos*
Corner 76th and Amsterdam. City
Directory lists segar store as owned
by Ira Zimmer.

Only four or five blocks from the Varamista! Pedley nodded as if in confirmation of a conjecture.

The second memorandum was typed:

Tedder, Kay (Mrs. Alexander Stavro)
Business/ Tedder Studios (Int. Dec.)
427 East 57th St., Manhattan.
Credit standing; per J. Quincy White,
V.P. Nat. City Bank. N.S.G.
\$4,000 note overdue on 1st mortgage
on 57th St. property. Account over-
drawn. Cash on hand, negligible.
Bank considering foreclosure.

At the bottom, in Barney's backhand script, was a notation: *She has guaranteed bank note will be paid within three days. B.*

T W E N T Y

He dialed the Varamista, asked to be put through to Miss Tedder's apartment:

"Ed? How's your patient?"

"Still under the influence."

"When she wakes up, I want you to ask her something while she's still groggy. If you toss it at her before she has her wits about her she might not be able to dredge up a good, believable lie."

"What you want to know?"

"When did she last use her Renault and where did she leave it?"

"Didn't Danahey know her garage?"

"The Parkere, yair. I saw the Dauphine. I want to know if she was driving it at three-four o'clock this morning."

"I'll ask her, coach. What was holding Russ up?"

"Nothing but cold nerve. Stavro's son, Miss Tedder's boy Rik, was at the Fassler girl's place, gave Russ a rugged reception. Rik got away but Russ held Stavro's gal-pal till I came, though he was in bad shape. He's in Saint Vincent's with a broken leg, some caved-in ribs and so on."

"That kid plays rough."

"If he drops in on you, don't use kid gloves on him."

"No . . . and speaking of such, I found a pair of hers—pigskin driving gloves looked like, in her garbage disposal can. If they'd been used to load a coal truck they couldn't have been blacker."

"She was at the fire, no doubt of it. Some doubt as to just what she was doing there. Any luck with your probing?"

"Not so far, coach."

"Keep at it, boy."

Barney had put copies of the city editions of the afternoon papers on his desk; he read the headlines while taking one of the pills the surgeon had given him at the fire:

LITTLE ITALY BLAZE CLAIMS
TWO—HEROIC FIREMAN SLAIN
AFTER SPECTACULAR RESCUE

Story on p. 3

He rang the Saracen, glanced at the second newspaper while waiting to be connected with the Leski suite:

SUSPECT ARSON-KILLING IN
FATAL TENEMENT FIRE AS
SECOND FIREMAN IS SLAIN

Commissioner Grezik Denies Bungling
as Bureau of Fire Investigation
Methods Challenged by Police Officials

"Hello? Leski? Pedley, here. Prisoner still on the premises?"

"You want to talk to him?"

"No. Want to tip you off that his son now has the key that bouncy-buttocks maid was using to let Stavro in and out. He'll try to use it; he might use a switchblade or a sap or a gun, too."

"I'll be ready for him, Marshal."

"You'd be smart if you asked Interpol for a relief guard."

"I can handle any teen-age boy by myself, thank you."

"Famous last words. Okay, if you can't, it's your funeral."

The telephone buzzed like a rattler the instant he replaced it on the base; he lifted it to his ear expecting to hear Barney's voice.

"Ben? This's Charley Grezik."

"I was just about to ring you, Commissioner."

"Little late to help me stave off that pack of newspapermen. Have you seen the afternoon editions?"

"Only the headlines."

"They're clobbering us, Ben."

"We're not the only firemen who've been taking punishment, Commissioner."

"Of course not, but the way they're riding us, it's going to hurt every man in the Department. Some reporter got hold of the fact that you had the firebug there at Little Italy and then let him get away from you."

"Only thing wrong with that story is that the kid I grabbed wasn't the torch."

"You have a more likely suspect?" Commissioner Grezik was skeptical.

"We're detaining three, at present," Pedley said. "The dead woman's son, his wife and his mistress. Couple others still at large but we're closing in on 'em."

"Closing in on unnamed suspects, arrests imminent, all that crap—Ben, the newspapers don't go for that stuff any more and City Hall won't stand still for it. I tell you, I'm out on a rotten limb and they're sawing it off fast. The police are claiming you've been usurping their investigatory powers, and bungling the job at that."

"Usurping my hindside! The old woman was an arson victim, so was Pete Arnette. Arresting and convicting the party who torched the tenement and killed two people is the Bureau's job. We're on it; we're going to finish it."

"How about Larry Foster?"

"Not for quotation, Commissioner, but in my opinion, Larry wasn't beaten to death by the firebug, so that case isn't in our jurisdiction. It may be we'll round up the murderer, too; if we do it will show who's been bungling . . . and it won't be your Bureau of Fire Investigation."

"Ben, you know I'd like to believe that, because you know how much confidence I've always had in your handling of the Bureau—"

"But what?" Pedley broke in.

"Why, City Hall's on my neck, that's what. They're demanding your resignation as a means of restoring public confidence in the Fire Department."

"If there's any lack of confidence—" Pedley let anger creep into his tone—"it's politically inspired, Commissioner. We've only been at this thing a little over twelve hours. Seems to me I've heard of a couple of instances where the police have taken slightly longer to—"

"Sure, sure. Don't get sore, Ben."

"Hell, I *am* sore, Commissioner. You sit there in your soft leather chair and complain about pressure being brought on you. One of our boys got killed in a backflash at Little Italy. I took a few stitches over there, myself. I just had to send one of my deputies to the hospital with a batch of broken bones, acquired in line of duty on this case. If the Mayor wants to make an issue of it, the Bureau could put together a pretty good feature for the newspapers."

"I know, Ben. I realize all that."

"If you think you're going to get my resignation, you're wrong. You can demote me or remove me but I won't go quietly until I've put this firebug where he belongs. Pete Arnette was a friend of mine, Commissioner."

"I appreciate how you feel. But unless I can present

something definite to the Mayor and the Board in the morning—”

“We ought to have this ball of wax all wound up by morning.”

“The powers that be insist I take action today, Ben.”

“Still gives us better than eight hours.”

The receiver in Pedley’s hand was so silent that the Marshal thought the connection had been broken. Then Charley Grezik sighed: “I’ll be home around midnight. Call me then?”

“I’ll call you, Commissioner.”

“Good hunting, Ben.”

The slashes around the corners of Pedley’s mouth were deeper than ever as he set the receiver back on the cradle. He gazed blankly at his blotter. Eight hours. Less than five hundred minutes . . .

His eyes focused on a sheet of paper which had been folded over twice; on the blank upper quarter Barney had scribbled: *Frankie the Actor*.

Pedley unfolded the sheet, a poster-size Wanted bulletin with a grainy blowup of Kolz’s photograph. The man was bald; his face was thin, almost gaunt; his features nondescript—the kind of regular nose and ordinary mouth that provide no particular reason to be remembered. The eyes, in the front view, were dull and lackluster—the eyes of a dead fish.

The Marshal read the magnified typewritten lines:

Frank Stober Kolz, alias Frank Kelsey, Francis King, William Kelleher, many others. (See file on nicknames.) Often called Frankie the Actor. Has posed on occasion as steeplejack, Methodist minister, insurance salesman, newspaper reporter, postman, carnival spieler, airline executive, bank guard, lawyer, highway engineer, building inspector, credit man, etc., etc.

This man is meticulous about dressing for the part he plays and frequently is successful in hoodwinking people in the same line of work. He is usually armed and should be considered extremely dangerous.

Pedley folded the bulletin, thrust it in his pocket, put the spark-marked hat on his head.

"Barney," he called, picking up the newspapers, "I'm going up to Cohabet."

Vera Fassler wrinkled her nose. "But what a dreary ol' way to *put* it."

Barney wagged his fingers at the microphone into which she had been dictating. "You'll have to get the Underwriters' approval on this before you can use it, boss. What I mean, it's incendiary."

T W E N T Y - O N E

On the way down in the elevator, he scanned the newspaper accounts, found nothing the headlines had not suggested save a paragraph in the most derogatory story:

Raymond Buchmeister, 47, whose family lives in the four-story walkup directly behind the tenement in which the fatal blaze had its origin, reported to police that about three A.M., as he returned home from the midtown café where he is employed as a waiter, he saw a light-colored foreign sports car parked on his street only a short distance from First Avenue. Since imported cars are not frequently seen in the neighborhood and are seldom parked in his vicinity at that hour of night, he spoke to his wife about it on arriving home. Being on the street a short time later because of precautionary evacuation ordered by police, he noticed that the car was no longer there. Residents of the area are being questioned about the ownership of the car but there has been no suggestion that its presence was connected with the lethal conflagration.

Pedley tossed the newspapers on the back seat of the Buick. If the Renault's driver had been sufficiently leery of being seen and later recognized that he had parked clear around on the other side of Mamma Carlotta's block, the inference was plain that he—or she—either knew there had been a tragedy or expected to precipitate one.

The emphasis on "police" in both newspaper accounts rankled, the legmen—or their rewrite men—seemed deter-

mined to create the impression that none of the intelligent investigation was being accomplished by the Bureau of Fire Investigation. He growled under his breath as he bore down on the accelerator. He understood very well that newspapermen with a pipe line into police headquarters were accustomed to slant their stories in such a way as to reflect credit on the "force." But they might have taken into consideration, he reflected dourly, that in this case it had been Fire Department personnel which had run all the risks, paid all the penalties.

He curbed the Buick half a block from the *Habanero—Fine Handmade Cigars* sign. It was a nondescript block: a gaudily orange cleaning establishment next to a dignified florist shop, a cluttered-up shoe repair business cheek by jowl with a fancy, gilt-edged grocery which catered to a clientele which could afford beluga caviar and smoked pheasant.

The cigar-store window was stacked high with bundles of blunts and perfectos, all placarded as *Factory Seconds at Bargain Prices*.

Inside, the establishment had the aroma of good pipe tobacco mingled with stale cigar smoke. The gnome behind the counter might have been any age from forty to seventy; his red bow tie was only inches above the top of the glass counter; his shock of white hair might have been a wig patterned after Einstein; he was smoking a long black stogie like the riverboat gambler in a Civil War epic. "Something for you, sir?"

"Information, maybe." Pedley slid his badge across the counter so the other could read the blue lettering on the golden ground. "You're Ira Zimmer?"

"'S right, Marshal."

"Know a kid, Richard Stavro?"

The bright, black eyes of the gnome examined the badge,

then studied the Marshal's fire-darkened face and smoke-reddened eyes. "Lotsa kids in here; I don't ask their names when they plunk down dough for a pack of filter tips."

Pedley put the badge back in his pocket as he described Rik.

"Hm." The gnome shifted the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other by a series of excruciating facial contortions. "Might be the lad who comes in here, now and then, to buy a pack of cigs and get a big bill changed. Sounds 's if he might be the one. I ain't seen him, couple days. If it's the same one, he's always loaded with lettuce."

"You'd recall his name if you'd ever taken phone messages for him?"

"Might, might not." A wary glint came into the sharp, black eyes. "Get quite a few phone messages, course of a week. Can't remember 'em all."

Pedley pointed to a blackboard screwed to the wall behind the cash register; the original black had flaked off the plywood so the board looked as if it were afflicted with measles. "This your memory aid, Mr. Zimmer?"

"Sort of," the proprietor admitted cautiously.

The Marshal examined the chalked scrawls on the board:

S = bf 5
Ed — Hel @²x

"What's with these? Markers on the stakes race at Jamaica?"

"Is the Fire Department stooging for the shoofly squad these days, trying to get the goods on bookmakers?"

"Not a bit of it," Pedley said. "I don't give a damn how much bookie business you do. Matter of fact, I like to get down a bet myself once in a while. But what's the significance of these hieroglyphics?"

"Bar shorthand. Lotsa barmen use it, you never noticed?"

Zimmer seemed mollified at the Marshal's attitude. "I used to work in Julius's place; learned it down there."

"The uninitiated need a code book to understand it, I guess."

"Just common sense. See, you get a dozen calls in an hour, say, for guys who are expected to drop in that P.M. You can't possibly be expected to remember all that guk so you set it down on the blackboard. Still and all, the guys don't like their personal affairs paraded right out in public where every Tom Dick knows their business. So to protect his customers, the barman shorthands it. Like that S means Sam; Sam will be at the 'same' place—" he tapped the equal sign with a fingernail that was in mourning—"before five, see?"

"Beginning to catch on. And what's with Ed in this next cryptogram?"

"Why, all it stands for is Ed is to go to the bar—" the gnome touched the dash—"to meet Helen at any time to-night." He flicked the ?x with the back of his fingers. "Question mark, times mark. Means 'any old time.' Clear?"

"Simple as hog Latin, once you have the key, yair." The Marshal stepped into the open phone booth. "You don't recall any cabalistic notations you might have put down for anyone named Stavro?"

"Don't ring any bell." The gnome was noncommittal again. "Uh uh."

On the paneling of the booth, beside the instrument, various names and numbers had been scrawled in ink, pencil and one, obviously, in vermilion lipstick:

5 AMIDLEVY Marcella LO 6-9188 \$81.25
14th row portal 2 NUTSNUTSNUTS 2# grnd beef
HAV JOK MU 8-4767 Meade Uniform Co.

Pedley contemplated this miscellany with a sort of con-

centrated ferocity, jotting down the phone numbers and the cryptic memos. As he came out of the booth he unfolded the Wanted bulletin.

"Maybe you still can help, my friend." He held up the poster. "Recognize this beauty contestant?"

The gnome's lips moved as he silently read the information about Frankie Kolz. When he spoke, it was in an awed whisper: "Assault with deadly weapon! *And* murder. Holy crysake! No, sir; can't say I do. What's more, can't say I'd admit it, if I did. I don't want word to get around I fingered a bird like *him*. My insurance ain't paid up."

"He wouldn't bother you," Pedley said. "He only goes after the big scores. But if he does happen to drop in to buy a few panatellas, give the Bureau of Fire Investigation a ring and ask for Ben Pedley, hah? Might be something in it for you. By the way, how late you stay open?"

"Close at ten-thirty. Don't count on hearing from me, mister. I got enough to do, minding my own business, without acting as a police informer."

"Not police," the Marshal reminded him gently. "Fire Department." He folded the bulletin, went out, stood a moment absently surveying the street, then sauntered around the corner.

Adjoining the cigar store on the side street was a staircase which rose steeply from behind a door with a dirty half-pane of glass bearing lettering evidently executed by an amateur of the art:

Clean Rooms——Weekly Rates

Next to the entrance was a watch repair shop, its well-polished window displaying a collection of clocks with identifying tags. There seemed to be no one inside the shop. The door was locked.

He returned to the gateway to Clean Rooms at Weekly Rates, opened the door, sniffed at the commingled fragrance of diapers and disinfectant. Now he recalled the history of the old building: it had been a middle-class apartment house until its comparatively recent descent in the economic scale. The apartments had apparently been converted to single cubicles.

At the top of the stairs a large room served as an office, the walls a bilious green, the ceiling plaster a spiderweb of cracks. A plank table covered with oilcloth doubled as a reception desk. Behind it, a young woman, straggly-haired and wan-faced, carrying an infant in her arms and another, obviously, beneath a faded house dress, pushed a pair of spectacles up onto the bridge of her nose to get a good look at him.

"Oney thing I got is a third-floor front, for ten-fifty."

"I'm from the Fire Department, Mrs.—?"

"Clark. What you want of us?" She was frightened.

"How many roomers you have here?"

"Nineteen, twenty. I don' know if that girl in the second rear is comin' back or not." She jiggled the child-in-arms irritably, to quiet her. "You got no call to bother us. We ain't had no trouble with fires."

"Glad to hear it. Happen to have a list of your tenants?"

"My husban', he has, somewheres. Oney he won't be home until quarter to six. He works for the express company. He don't get off till five."

Behind the green and red of the oilcloth was a shelf which substituted as pigeonholes for tenants' mail. He stepped to the end of the makeshift desk. "Mind if I peek at that bunch of letters?"

"No, *sir!*" She faced him, alarmed but determined. "I can't do that. That's U.S. mail; we're responsible for it until it's delivered to the proper party. You leave that alone!"

"All right." He passed it off. "Don't you have any phone here in your rooming house?"

"No, sir, we had it took out." She was still on the defensive. "It disturbed too many people. A lot of our roomers work nights and sleep days and you could hear it all over every time it rung and some people abused the privilege by talking ten, fifteen minutes at a time."

"I can believe it." He went to the fire extinguisher in the wall bracket at the top of the stairs. "How long since this was inspected?"

She put a fist to her mouth in consternation. "Not . . . long. I couldn't say . . . exactly."

"I'll send a couple men 'round to check on it." He touched the baby's cheek with the tip of his little finger, making that clucking sound which unmarried males seem to think fascinating to children. "I'd say you don't have anything to worry about, Mrs. Clark."

The baby began to squall as he went down to the street.

T W E N T Y - T W O

The personnel of Ladder Company 58 was washing down the apparatus. Lieutenant Swisher wore a harassed expression as he wrote entries in the day book. His tone was one of aggravation.

"Those Homicide bloodhounds been sniffing at our heels all afternoon, Marshal. They seem to think we've been holding out on them, that we have some inside information about Larry's personal life we won't give out with."

"Your boys resent that bulldozing approach, sure." Pedley went to the Battalion map on the wall. "Did the man on the watch desk remember whether Foster had any phone calls before he left the firehouse?"

"He didn't. I told Larry to take the day off; the guy was really all shook up and I thought he'd snap out of it quicker if he wasn't where he'd have to talk to Pete's friends when they stopped around to sympathize."

Pedley turned from the wall map to cock an inquisitive eyebrow. "What friends?"

"Some television repairman who knew Pete was in here talking to Larry for ten, fifteen minutes, asking about the funeral arrangements, so on. 'Course Larry couldn't tell him to beat it, but I could see it wasn't easy for Larry to go into details about how Pete died. So I told him to take sick leave for the day; he was still coughing up smoke anyway."

"How old a guy was this alleged repairman?"

Swisher laid down his pen. "Oh . . . hard to say. Forty-ish, around that." He scowled.

"Ever seen the fellow before, Lieutenant?"

"Couldn't swear to it. He looked like somebody you pass on the street a dozen times a week and barely remember."

"Happen to notice his eyes?"

"He was wearing sun glasses, Marshal." The Lieutenant came to his feet. "You have any reason to suppose this bird was the murderer?"

Pedley took the Wanted bulletin out of his pocket, unfolded it. "Any resemblance to your TV repairman?"

"A disguise artist, hah!" Swisher peered intently at the poster. "I'd hate to swear to it, one way or the other. 'Course, he was wearing coveralls and a cloth cap, but—all I can say is, he *might* have been this Kolz. Do the cops know about him?"

"They've been hunting him for months. They know his connection with Mamma Carlotta's son, Alex Stavro; they know about the Louisville bank robbery staged by Kolz. What they don't know—" Pedley turned to the map—"is that the key to this whole business—the fire, Pete's death and Larry's murder—may be right here." His forefinger tapped the corner of Amsterdam and Seventy-sixth Street. "Familiar with this firetrap? Between the cigar store and the clock shop?"

"Flea-bag rooming house." Swisher nodded. "Twenty-odd rooms. Used to be the Glenwood Apartments."

"Run by the Clarks, man and wife, trying to scrape by with enough to meet the lease payments. Probably find one violation for each tenant. Insufficient extinguisher equipment, inadequate escapes, lack of fire exit lights and signs, accumulated trash in a public-occupancy structure. How'd it be if you sent three, four of your best men over there to

make a room-by-room search for faulty wiring, defective outlets, so on?"

"What," asked Swisher, "would they really be looking for?"

"Probably a metal box about so by so." Pedley spread his hands to show the size. "Kind of box a lot of small businessmen use for petty cash. Only this one holds, or did, a quarter-million dollars in bonds and national bank bills."

"A quarter-million!" Swisher whistled softly.

"We want the box mainly to tell us who was hiding it. If your boys can locate it, they can find out from the Clarks who was occupying that room. The boys will have to go over the place with fine-tooth combs but at the same time keep a sharp eye out for the obvious hiding places, wastebaskets, lunch boxes, so on. The box itself may have been tossed in a trash can; the money might be in a pile of old newspapers or at the bottom of a laundry bag."

"You don't have to make it an order, Marshal. I'll pick three men from the shift that's going off in ten minutes; send 'em right over."

"Warn 'em to watch their footwork. If they step on this party's toes, there'll be a reaction. But they'll have to go through the place like an exterminator, regardless of annoying the tenants."

"The three I'll send were all Pete's pals . . . and Larry's. Nobody will stop them from taking the rooming house to pieces, if they think they can put the finger on the killer. Can I show them that Wanted bulletin?"

"Wouldn't do a bit of good, Lieutenant. Party in whose room they might dig up this cash won't look like that at all. How long you expect it'll take them to make a thorough search?"

"Ought to have word for you within the hour, Marshal."

"Get through to the Bureau fast, Lieutenant."

Pedley went out to the Buick. A small ruby eye glowed a warning from the short-wave set. He flipped the toggle switch to Talk.

"Chief Fire Marshal. Chief Fire Marshal calling BFI."

"Boss? Barney. Where you?"

"Ladder Fifty-eight. Why?"

"You got a hurry-up call for help from Tom Leski."

"What's his sweat? Stavro's son show up at the Saracen?"

"No. Leski's in jail."

"For . . . ?"

"Shooting a dame in his suite." Barney was excited. "He wants you to go to the Forty-seventh Street station and explain to the cops that he was acting in cooperation with our Bureau when he winged this Helen Stavro."

"What he means is, I warned him about trusting any floor maid who might be Kolz masquerading. So he went off half-cocked and shot the first woman who came into his suite. What the hell did happen?"

"Near's I can find out, the Stavro dame goes to the Saracen to see her brother. Leski won't let her in the suite. She puts up a holler, takes off her shoe, begins hammering on the door with it, all the while screaming like a wounded weasel. Leski opens the living-room door to quiet her down, she rushes in, demanding to see her brother. Leski won't let her in the bedroom so she goes for him, claw and fang. He panics and shoots her in the arm, *voom!*"

"'Ray for Interpol. So . . . ?"

"So up comes an assistant manager with a house detective and a bell captain to find the dame on the divan, bleeding like a stuck porker, and Leski with gore all over his shirt and the pistol still in his hand. Naturally, they have to run him in and send her to the hotel's hospital."

"Where was Stavro all this time?"

"Who knows? He got away. Leski claims she must have

had the key you told him the son had taken. Anyhow, someone had unlocked the bedroom door and let Stavro get away."

"In his shorts?"

"As far as Leski knows, yeah. Stavro's suit was still in the closet in the suite's living room after Leski learned his prisoner had decamped. Leski's been ringing me every ten minutes to know how soon you can get down there to explain to the police."

"I'm starting right now, Barney. But not for Forty-seventh Street. Check that Fifty-eighth Street address for me, will you? Is it six-twenty?"

"Nat Pendiff's residence? Yeah, six-twenty East. But, boss, what do I tell Leski?"

"Tell him," said Pedley, "that I expect to have his prisoner back in custody in half an hour."

T W E N T Y - T H R E E

The town house of Nathaniel Pendiff was austerity in architecture. Four solid stories of graystone; Georgian pillars at the portico; a massive door of bronze. The woman who answered Pedley's ring was in her sixties; her dress was simple and somber; her hair was as gray as the building stone with something of the same smooth and unyielding appearance.

"Mr. Pendiff? He is not at home."

"I'll come in, wait." There was a rocky hardness, he thought, even in her voice.

"I regret I cannot permit you in the house in Mr. Pendiff's absence."

"Not a question of permission. I'm on Fire Department business. I don't want to be disagreeable about it, but I can be if I have to be." Over her shoulder, he saw the Leghorn hat on the hall table. "Tell your employer so."

She compressed her lips, retreated into the gloom of the hallway, vanished.

He gazed at a portrait in an imposing gilt-filigreed frame above the hall table: an elderly man in the black robes of a judge. The likeness to Pendiff was striking, yet somehow not in favor of the younger man.

The woman reappeared. "You may go up. The second floor." She pointed, watched as he stepped into the small automatic elevator, closed the sliding door.

The lawyer still gave the impression of dandyism although he was in shirt sleeves, highball in one hand, pipe in

the other. "Do you always force your way into private homes in this rough and rude manner, Marshal?"

"Along about four this morning, I lost all my polite instincts, Pendiff. I saw that old woman's body."

"Tragic, yes, to be sure. But—"

"Where's Stavro?" Pedley cut in.

"He's not here, as you can see." The attorney's expansive gesture took in book-lined walls, a black marble fireplace flanked by divans in pomegranate red, an onyx cocktail table with decanters and ice bucket.

"I'm in a hurry, Pendiff."

"What makes you think Alex would come to my house?"

"He got away from his Interpol guard. He wouldn't have gone to his sister's; they just took her to the hotel hospital."

"No!" The lawyer made it an exclamation of surprise.

"Stavro wouldn't have gone to his wife's apartment; anyhow, one of my deputies is up there." Pedley squinted at the oak-paneled door beyond the fireplace. The door was between two windows which must look out on the East River; either there was a small closet sunk in the wall or else the door led out to a second-floor balcony. "He's too smart to have gambled on going down to his mistress's house; he must know she's being detained. But he'd have to have a place to hide from the partner he double-crossed. Where else but at the house of the lawyer who put up ten thousand dollars of his own money as a reward . . . with the hope of getting it back plus a nice profit, of course."

"You malign me, Marshal."

"I haven't started to, yet; don't crowd me. Stavro came here. I'll make a quinnel and bet he told you he wanted to give himself up before Frankie the Actor slides a knife in his ribs."

Pendiff sauntered toward the oak door. "Have to hand it to you. You've calculated it all out remarkably well. But you are in error in one regard. My client has agreed to sur-

render, but on my advice. I have dissuaded him from attempting a flight to Honduras—which, as you know, has no treaty of extradition with this country. I have convinced him that he still has an opportunity to make amends here and turn over a new leaf.”

“Translating from that legal bafflegab, he’s ready to cop a plea?”

“He’s prepared to pay his debt to society, let’s put it that way. In view of his readiness to cooperate with the authorities in the matter of recovering the stolen funds—” Pendiff lounged back against the door, his arms folded across his chest—“and also of his willingness to testify against this murderer Kolz, I’m confident the court will regard him with leniency in the matter of sentencing.”

“Oh, horse, Pendiff. Stavro can’t make a deal; he hasn’t a card to deal with. He doesn’t know how to locate the quarter-million, so he can’t convince the court he’ll save a dime for the surety company which bonded the bank. Nor can he bargain on the basis of turning state’s evidence against a man nobody can get to stand still long enough to slip the handcuffs on. You know all this. If you’ve sold him on the idea of spending a stretch in a cell, you must have a personal angle. Are you conning him into prison so you can get your own hands on that dough?”

“Attempting to discredit counsel is a trick with which I’m quite familiar, Marshal.” The lawyer smiled, dryly. “But before you try it, you ought to get your facts straight. First, Alex does indeed know where the money is.”

“Maybe he thinks you’ve already managed to get hold of it. You probably knew he’d been over at his mother’s, yesterday evening. You might have paid the old lady a midnight visit, yourself.”

“Now you’re hoping to needle me into making some retort you can construe as an admission, but I’m familiar with that sort of tactics, too.” Pendiff reddened nevertheless.

"However, I don't have to put up with your offensive remarks; fortunately, I don't have to. About five minutes before you bulldozed your way into my residence, I talked with Inspector Mulhouse at police headquarters and arranged for my client to give himself up."

"Sorry to have to disappoint the Inspector. Your client's being taken into custody by the Bureau of Fire Investigation, here and now."

"You're a trifle late, Marshal. I have guaranteed to deliver him to the police. They will have an officer here—"

"I've had enough trouble today so that a little more won't make a damn bit of difference, Pendiff. Consider yourself under arrest."

"You're laying yourself—and the Fire Department—open to a heavy liability for false arrest, Marshal."

"Sue in the morning, if you still feel like it, counselor. But tonight you sleep on a detention-room cot. You want to ask your client to come along quietly with you? Or would you prefer that I drag him out myself?"

"You must know that the authority of the police will supersede that of the Fire Department."

"Read the statutes again, Pendiff. You're wrong. Nobody—as the ads say—but nobody, overrules a Fire Marshal. And I'm in no mind to debate the point."

Pendiff stepped aside, twisted a catch to unlock the door, swung it wide.

Alex Stavro nearly fell flat on his face; he had been leaning against the door with his ear to the thick paneling. He stumbled in from the narrow balcony, blinking at the strong light in the study.

Pedley caught the fat man's arm, spun him toward the elevator. "You, too, counselor. I'm too pooped to play muscle, muscle, who's got the muscle, with you. But you're coming along if you have to go feet first." He slid open the elevator door.

The lawyer followed Stavro into the cage. "He'll never get away with this, Alex. Just let him babble on."

Stavro stared at him. "Nat! Why didn't you answer him when he hinted you might have gone up to Mamma's last night?"

"Out!" Pedley cut it short. "Do your scrapping in the car. Move!" He hustled them past the baleful woman in black, out to the Georgian portico.

"Officer!" Pendiff shouted, waving at a uniformed patrolman across the street. "*Police!!*"

Pedley cuffed him, shoved him into the back seat as the patrolman came running.

"Now, then—" the brogue was emphasized by an upswinging nightstick—"what's the matter, here?" He reached around to his hip pocket.

Pendiff shouted: "*Kidnaping!!*"

Pedley put his hand under his lapel: "Fire Marshal, show you my badge."

At the movement, Stavro broke away, scuttled off down the sidewalk.

"Halt, there!" The policeman's gun glinted as the muzzle swung toward the fleeing prisoner.

Pedley snapped, "Hold it," as he pulled his own pistol from its armpit holster.

Stavro didn't stop. The cop's gun gave out a flat, crackling report.

The fat little man screeched, flung up his arms, fell sideways into the gutter.

Pedley brought his pistol out in a sweeping motion that slammed the barrel on a swift tangent against the policeman's skull just below his uniform cap.

The lawyer cried, "You all *crazy!!*?"

Pedley clubbed the cop once more. The officer's knees sagged, let him slump forward, slowly, to the pavement.

T W E N T Y - F O U R

The lawyer stumbled from the car. "You claim authority to go 'round clubbing cops, too, whenever you feel like it, Marshal?"

"Look at that uniform." Pedley took the revolver from the policeman's limp grasp. "Ever see an officer's tunic fit sloppily as this? Couple sizes too big in the chest, couple inches too short at the waist." He retrieved the uniform cap, which had fallen from the bald head. "Cap's too small for him, too. He couldn't get away with wearing misfits like that at a roll call in any muster room I know of."

Stavro wailed, "Get me a doctor! Get an ambulance! I've been shot!"

The Marshal unbuttoned the uniform coat, used his knife to slit the suspenders holding the trousers of the unconscious man. "You're not hurt too badly, Stavro, if you can still yell like that. Take it easy, until we hamstring this impersonator."

Pendiff stared down at the bald-headed man. "My God! Is *he* the Actor?"

"Frankie Kolz? Yair." The Marshal felt in the inside pocket of the tunic. "I'd say so. Checks with the bulletin description. I thought Stavro recognized his partner; that's why he made the breakaway. This lug didn't walk like a patrolman—no cop who spends eight hours a day pounding his arches has that much jouncy spring left in his stride.

Then, that ill-fitting coat cinched it. Cops are required to have their uniforms cut to fit." He extracted a .22 automatic from the right hip pocket of the uniform trousers. "Keep an eye on him while I look at your client."

Stavro sat up, a dumpy, doleful figure in a spreading puddle of blood. "Did you kill him?"

"Kolz? No. Removed his fangs, time being." Pedley went down on his haunches. "Where'd he get you?"

"Through the back," Stavro whimpered.

"Roll over." The Marshal made a brief inspection. "Now, stand up. You can do it. You haven't lost that much blood."

"It *hurts!*" Stavro protested, tearfully.

"Hell, man! You've only been rump-shot! Bullet caught you in the tail. Get up. Hike back to the Buick."

A green patrol car slipped quietly around the corner, fifty yards away, its headlights twin cones of brightness focusing on the fat man as he arose, hand clutching ludicrously at his buttock.

Pedley beckoned with Frankie's gun.

The patrol car slowed, stopped twenty feet away. A plain-clothesman stepped out, pistol in hand. His partner grabbed a hand mike, began to talk vehemently to someone back at Communications.

"Fire Marshal, here," Pedley called calmly. "Couple prisoners for you."

The plain-clothesman advanced warily until he saw the uniformed man lying on the sidewalk.

Stavro whined, "Has anybody called an ambulance?"

The second detective slid from behind the wheel, gun drawn. "Up with 'em, gunner. *Up, fast!*"

Pedley made a gesture of disgust. "How many times you boys seen me at the lineup, for Godsake! And how much of the Police Department's work do you expect the Bureau of Fire Investigation to do? I'm turning over two prisoners.

Fat boy there is Alex Stavro; he's been pinked in the butt by this other joker, who was masquerading as a blue. He's your prize: a multiple murderer the FBI has been hunting for months. Frankie Kolz, wanted for blasting a guard in that big Louisville stickup, prison escape, so on and forth."

Stavro cried, "He's right. That's Frankie the Actor; he just tried to kill me, too. Can't you run me to a hospital?"

The nearer of the two plain-clothesmen peered intently at the Marshal. "It's Pedley, sure 'nough, Arny."

Arny warned: "Watch out for the one behind him."

Pedley sighed wearily. "Why don't you come down off your tiptoes! Fella behind me is the guy who phoned Mulhouse to send you boys around here. Nat Pendiff, the fat lad's lawyer."

Arny bent over Kolz. "What'd you say happened to this officer?"

"I put the club to him before he took a second shot at his ex-partner in crime." Pedley caught the lawyer's arm. "And I cut his braces so he'd be hamstrung if he tried to run for it. But he'll be able to sign a confession in half an hour or so."

Arny pushed his fedora forward so the brim shaded his eyes and scratched behind his ear with the front sight of his pistol. "Let me get it right. You—" he pointed at the lawyer—"phoned Inspector Mulhouse that your client Stavro wanted to surrender."

"Exactly." Pendiff nodded.

"Then this impersonator—" the plain-clothesman touched his shoe to Kolz's shoulder—"he tries to gun down your client."

"Correct," agreed Pendiff.

"And after he's taken one shot at Stavro, the Marshal steps in and—*hey!*"

Frankie's arm snaked out, his hand clutched the detec-

tive's ankle, pulled him down to the sidewalk. There was a flurry of arms and legs, a groan as Army's knee landed heavily in the pit of the Actor's stomach, a shout from Stavro—

"Look out, he'll get that gun!"

The other detective stooped and handcuffs clicked.

Pedley led the attorney toward the Buick. "All yours, boys. If you want any affidavits about your prisoners, call my office."

"Wait a minute." Army stood up, red faced. "We're taking this lawyer with us, too."

"Of course," Pendiff agreed hastily.

"Hell you are." The Marshal pushed him into the driver's seat. "Pendiff's my meat. He's mixed up in an arson mess. If you want to ask any questions of him, he'll be at the Bureau."

"Now, listen, Marshal . . ." Army's partner began.

"*You* listen!" Pedley growled. "Looks to me as if you had your hands full with one prisoner who's acting up and another who's ready to pass out. But if you think you can handle another full-size argument, just say so; I'll take it from there." He didn't wait for an answer but slammed the car door, leaving Pendiff at the wheel.

He had circled the front of the car, was sitting on the front seat beside the lawyer, before Army made a feeble retort: "We'll have to report the prisoner was taken by force from the custody of police officers, that's all."

"Be sure to tell the Inspector who took him away from you." Pedley dug an elbow into the lawyer's ribs. "Key's in the switch. Hit it, let's get rolling." He picked up the hand mike, got through to Barney before Pendiff had passed the prowler car.

"Anything from Lieutenant Swisher, Barno?"

"Report just in, boss. They searched all twenty-one rooms, drew nothing but blanks."

"They've given up?"

"No, no. Lieutenant says they're still searching; he'll buzz back, half an hour. Meantime, word comes from Ed."

"Did the Sleeping Beauty come out of her coma?"

"So Prince Charming Shaner says." Barney chuckled. "And deponent further states that Miss Tedder allows the last time she used her car was around ten-forty-five last night, that she left it parked on the street at the Varamista and hasn't used it since. But she also said her son had managed to have duplicate keys made for the Renault and she thinks it is possible he may have had the car out later last night."

"I'll go further, Barney, and say it's likely he did." Pedley sighed. "Well, this is one of the cases that circumstances keep altering, Barnabus. I was about to bring Nat Pendiff down to the Bureau for a tête-à-tête with his friend Vera Fassler, but I believe I'd better hop up to the Varamista before that pot boils over. I'll get back to you, boy." He turned to the lawyer. "I guess you know where the Varamista is, hah?"

T W E N T Y - F I V E

The lawyer drove at what seemed to Pedley a snail's crawl but he followed instructions, heading into the 72nd Street route across Central Park.

"By now," the Marshal suggested, "you'll have your alibi set?"

"Long since," Pendiff agreed. "Not one you'll break, either. Until two-thirty I was with a group at the monthly Bar Association meeting."

"Where'd you go when the social gathering broke up?"

"To a poker game at a friend's, where I won a few dollars from a police court magistrate, one of the district attorney's special investigators, a judge of General Sessions and counsel for the Mayor's budget committee. I think I can call on all of them as character witnesses, if you insist."

"All I'm insisting on is that an arsonist pay the penalty for his crime." The Marshal's husky voice betrayed his fatigue.

"Don't you think you have your man already? This Frank Kolz?"

"He may be a murderer, but I'm not after a murderer. Nothing I know so far leads me to believe he's a firebug, too. I'm glad we got him but I'd let a dozen killers get away scot-free, any day, to put an incendiarist behind bars. Tell me, how long has your client been separated from his wife?"

"Seven years, possibly longer than that."

"How come she has custody of the boy, if there's never been a divorce?"

"Alex couldn't contest it, being in and out of jail all the time."

"He thought she was bringing the boy up better, say, than his sister could?"

"It wasn't that. Simply that he couldn't fight the thing legally, since he couldn't come into court with clean hands."

"During that time, didn't his wife ever sue for separate maintenance or at least for an allowance to cover the son's upbringing?"

"She tried once, a year ago. But then she dropped it."

"Why? Stavro had money. He could have been forced to contribute to the boy's support. Why didn't she press the matter?"

"Any information I might have, bearing on that litigation, comes under the heading of privileged communication between client and counsel."

Pedley used his handkerchief to wipe fog from the windshield. "So Stavro had something on her." The windshield remained blurred. The lawyer made no move to turn on the windshield wipers. The Marshal shut his eyes as the Buick entered the shadowed areas of the park. When he opened them again, the blurring of the lights was worse; black spots, like blobs of soot floating in the air, danced crazily before him. He recognized the symptoms of physical exhaustion. The fog was inside his head.

Time's running out, Benjamin. Have to wind up this business damn soon or you'll be seeing little men coming out of the woodwork.

He flexed his neck muscles, took slow, deep breaths until the car stopped in front of the Varamista.

"I'll take the keys." His own voice sounded feeble and

far away to him. "Have you been here to Miss Tedder's apartment before?"

"Never."

"But you know her?"

"We've met." The lawyer was offhand. "A meeting in court hardly constitutes an acquaintance."

The night man was on duty at the switchboard. He raised a hand in greeting. "Nick of time, Marshal. Young Stavro just came pelting in here; raced upstairs before I could stop him."

"You tip off my deputy?"

"Sure thing, Marshal. He said he'd be ready for the kid."

"Good." Pedley's knees felt shaky as he strode to the elevator. He forced himself to instill a little authority in his tone. "I'll do the talking now, Pendiff. You speak when you're spoken to, that clear?"

The lawyer smiled sourly.

Pedley rapped on the door of the Tedder apartment, calling: "Shaner?"

"Come in." Shaner's shout came through faintly. "Door's unlocked."

"You first, Counselor." He pushed the lawyer ahead of him.

"Come join the party," Shaner hollered. "In the bedroom. Hi, coach. Ain't we got fun?"

Kay Tedder, looking rosily recovered, lay back against a propping of pillows. Her son, wearing a checkered sports jacket with one lapel half torn off, sat on the foot of the bed, facing her. Ed Shaner, with one foot up on the vanity bench, rested an elbow on his upraised knee, while the other arm dangled a .38 negligently.

"Good thing I was here, coach." The shirt-sleeved deputy gave a speculative glance at Pendiff, then raised the

gun to point at the boy. "Tough stuff, there, came roaring in, minute ago, with the idea of beating up his mother. I dissuaded him."

Kay Tedder pounded clenched fists on the bedspread.

"Don't *say* that! It's not *true*!"

"Hell it's not," Rik said sullenly. "This fatheaded hose-hauler is right. I did come home to make you tell me what you've done with Dad's money. If you hadn't told me, I'd have pummeled you to a quivering pulp like."

"Rikky!" she cried. "*Please!*"

"Ah, shaddup!" he snarled. "Don't give out with that maternal affection guk. You hate me like you hate my father. You'd do anything you could to make either of us suffer. If it hadn't been for this thick-neck smoke-eater getting in the first punch, I'd—"

"Hold it." Pedley stopped him with a traffic-cop palm. "What makes you think your mother knows where the loot is?"

"Rikky, *don't!*" Kay sat up, stretched a hand toward the boy. "*For God's sake!*"

The youth laughed harshly. "Think I won't tell 'em, Mom? You been holding out on Dad all this time—but you're not going to hold out on me." He twisted around so Pedley could see the lunatic brightness in the dark eyes. "You think Mom's a rich-bitch, don't you! A real, dough-heavy success as a businesswoman. Yah-yah. She's a floperino, a fluddy failure. She owes everybody—my old man more than anyone—but *he* won't foreclose on her, way the bank will. She's *broke!*" he yelled. "Understand, she's sunk! She'd do *anything*—absolutely anything, man—to get her hands on a real hunk of dough! And she did get it and I can by-God prove it."

Kay thrust her fingers in her ears, turned her head, fell back against the supporting pillows.

Shaner said, "While he was sprawling on the floor, after I'd had to clout him silly, coach, he began to bellow about her making a fat deposit at her bank this afternoon—and he wanted her to explain where she'd gotten hold of that much cash."

The boy sneered. "I know where she got it, all right."

"Where?" asked Pedley.

"From Mamma Carlotta." Rik fingered his black-and-blue Adam's apple tenderly.

Pedley said, "She was over there, before the fire?"

"Damn right she was," the boy answered. "She'll lie about it, but she was."

Kay Tedder, with her fingers still at her ears, shook her head silently.

"You're lying." Her son bared his teeth in challenge. "I don't know how you found out unless that crumbum Danahey, who you've been so drippy about, was listening in when Aunt Helen asked me to go over to Little Italy an' see could I do something for Dad—but I know you had the Renault over there—the night man at the garage told me you'd just brought it in a little while before I went there to grind off those goddam handcuffs—"

"Rik." Pedley interrupted. "Do you have a set of keys for your mother's car?"

"So what if I do, you cut-rate Sherlock!" The black eyes smoldered. "I never had the Dauphine at any time last night; I went over to Mamma Carlotta's on my bike, like I told you. But she—" he stabbed an accusatory finger at his mother—"she was over there; there was even a piece in the paper about some yuk who saw the Renault parked in the next block. An' she did get a mess of money somewhere, to put in the bank; she can deny it until she's black in the face—"

The phone on the bed table at Kay Tedder's elbow jan-

gled. She reached for the instrument but Shaner got to it first.

"Yeah? Oh, hello, Lieutenant. Yeah, right here." Ed held out the handset. "Swisher, coach."

Pedley sat on the bed, opposite Rik, to take the telephone. "Found something, Lieutenant?"

"What you were after, Marshal," Swisher answered. "We haven't checked it for total, but we opened it up and most of it's still there."

"Where'd you find it?"

"That's what I'm calling about, Marshal. The boys did a recheck of all the rooms and still came up drawing double blanks. But then they started on the johns—one of 'em on each floor—y'know, no private lavatories in that dump."

"And . . ."

"In the bottom of the toilet tank in the second-floor bathroom, under water, where you couldn't really see it until the water was flushed out, was this box, wrapped in white pliofilm that had been sealed with a hot iron to make it waterproof."

"Nice bit of overhauling for Ladder Fifty-eight, Lieutenant."

"Thought you might be disappointed that we couldn't tell you which one of the roomers hid it there. But it would be one of those on the second floor."

"Ought to be close enough," the Marshal said. "Have a couple of your lads bring it over here right away, will you? I'm in apartment Sixteen-B."

T W E N T Y - S I X

Quotation-mark puckers framed Ed Shaner's eyes as he watched the Marshal racking the receiver. "Say, coach. How's about taking time out? You look as if you could use a breather."

"No, I'm fine."

"Would a short snorter pick you up? She has some blended in the kitchen."

"Not now, Ed." Pedley gripped the head of the bed to keep his fingers from shaking. "I just had the equivalent of a shot in the arm. Boys from Ladder Fifty-eight found Stavro's boxful of bills and bonds in a rooming house over at Seventy-sixth and Amsterdam."

The boy's mouth opened. He gasped but no words followed.

His mother's eyes glazed as if she had been stunned; her face was a mask of misery.

Pendiff did an exaggerated double-take. "A cheap rooming house? Sounds like the sort of trick a quick-change artist would resort to—hiding a quarter-million dollars in a flea-bag like that!"

"Doesn't sound like Kolz to me." The Marshal had to gaze at him steadily for a few seconds to resolve the double fuzzy image of the lawyer into a single, clear focus. "If the Actor'd had that little packet in his possession, he'd have been on a plane, streaking for South America, instead of lurking around in front of your house, waiting to take a pot shot at his partner."

Pendiff shook his head. "You don't know much about Frankie, if you imagine he'd have left the city without taking revenge on Alex."

Shaner's stolid features reflected deep concern for the Marshal's condition. "Anything to show Stavro had a room at this dump, coach?"

"Not so far, Ed. Point is, if the little man had managed to wheedle the money away from Mamma Carlotta, he'd have been sure to keep it with him until he could make a trade with the prosecutor to let him off with a minimum sentence."

"You cockeyed kooks," Rik groaned in disgust, "with your dumbskull guessing games. My old man didn't get that prize package because Gran'ma didn't want him to have it to bargain with; she wanted him in jail. So who else but Mom could have put the snatch on the bundle? Look at her now. Can't you tell she did it?"

"Kind of difficult—" Pedley massaged the back of his neck in an attempt to stimulate circulation—"to present a guilty expression to the grand jury as evidence. I need something solid to connect your mother with this swag we've recovered."

Rik grimaced, holding up one hand with the fingers extended stiffly to the ceiling. "Mom knew Pop had hidden all this cash somewhere. She overheard me when Aunt Helen called me here, yesterday afternoon, and I said on the phone that I'd go right over and see what I could do with Mamma Carlotta. What more do you want—eyewitnesses to the murder?!"

"We want something that's not circumstantial," Pedley said. "For instance, happen to know if your mother has a fur neckpiece?"

The boy clutched at his long hair with both hands. "Ahrrr! He's found the dough; what's circumstantial about

that! He'll probably call it circumstantial that, when I came back from Aunt Helen's after changing my clothes over there, the Renault was parked on Amsterdam between Seventy-fifth and Seventy-sixth, only half a block from this rooming house. This man will have to see a signed confession like, before he has the guts to arrest her!"

"I have to be careful," the Marshal said evenly, "about weighing evidence from a prejudiced witness."

Shaner said, "How about a mink stole, coach?" He went to the hall closet. "A snazzy blue mink?"

"Might do it." Pedley wondered if Kay had a Benzedrine in her medicine cabinet.

"H'yar she." Shaner brought out a raincoat on a hanger, unbuttoned the top button of the raincoat, revealed a pastel-blue fur. "Ain't she purty?"

"Not the sort of thing you'd expect to see on the street in Little Italy at three o'clock in the morning, Ed. But apparently this one was spotted by a neighbor." Pedley turned to the woman. "Is this the fur you wore when you left the old lady's house to phone in the alarm, Miss Tedder?"

She ignored him. "Rikky, darling." She stretched out a hand: "*Rikky.*"

The boy struck her hand down, viciously. "Don't honey-talk me! You're always preaching at me that I mustn't be like Dad, because he's *dishonest*. *Yah! Where'd you get that money you put in the bank today?*" He spat at her.

She recoiled, making a whimpering like a puppy being beaten.

"We'll take the fur for evidence, along with those soot-smudged gloves of yours, Miss Tedder." Pedley resorted to digging the fingernails of one hand into the back of the other, in the hope the pain would help to keep him awake. "Do you want to say anything about having worn those gloves over at your mother-in-law's apartment?"

Kay Tedder shook her head with the convulsive movement of a swimmer emerging from a deep dive. She hesitated a moment, threw back her head, swung her legs off the bed, stood up. "No." She held herself stiffly erect, chin high. "No, I do not deny being at Mamma Carlotta's. I was there. I did send in the fire alarm."

Rik leaned toward her. "You *admit* it?" He seemed about to spring at her.

"Your mind is made up, Rikky. You're judging me before you take all the facts into account. You're set and determined to see me in the worst light." She spoke like a parent discussing a distressing school report. "You forget all the years your father left me to fend for myself. All the terrible times when I didn't have any money at all and didn't know which way to turn—when he might easily have helped me to take care of you by giving me just a little of the money he was squandering on women like . . . well, like Miss Fassler."

Her son shouted: "*You murdered Mamma Carlotta?*" He lunged at her, was brought up short by Ed Shaner's forearm clamped abruptly beneath his chin.

The boy howled with rage, kicked behind him wildly, clawed, over his shoulder, at the deputy's eyes.

"Put him away, Ed." The Marshal was harsh. "Fix him."

Shaner hoisted Rik bodily off the bed. He swung the boy's head down, rammed the black and tousled hair against the wall so hard a framed print of the Bridge of Arles fell from its hook, smashing the picture glass.

Pendiff exclaimed, "Don't *kill* the kid!"

Shaner grunted, butting the boy's head against the wall again. Then he turned and calmly laid the slumped figure against the pillows Miss Tedder had vacated.

The mother shuddered, turned her head away.

An angry hornet buzzed loudly at the hall door.

"I'll get it, Ed. Watch your prisoner. May be shamming." The Marshal went to the door. "Fifty-eight?" he called, his hand on the knob.

"Right, Marshal."

He opened the door. One of the pair of firemen held out a packet wrapped in newspaper. "Little gift of roses, with the Lieutenant's compliments."

"You boys get the compliments—" Pedley unwrapped a white metal box with a large red cross on the corner—"for dredging this up."

"Why—" it was Pendiff's voice at the Marshal's shoulder—"you mean to say all those valuables were packed into that empty first-aid kit?"

"Big enough . . . if the bills were big enough." Pedley lifted the lid.

The bundle of thousand-dollar banknotes lay on top of a certificate, printed in gilt and black, bearing an inked figure of \$60,000. There was also a small slip of paper with two brief penciled lines:

*Cash only totals \$90,000, Ben. He must
have taken a bite out of the cookie.*

Swisher

The second fireman said, "Will you be needing us any more, Marshal?"

"No," he said. "No. But wait a sec; I'd better give you a receipt for this." He backed around so Pendiff was no longer able to peer over his shoulder, closed the box, used it to write on, scribbled on the back of the Lieutenant's note. "There you are, boys." He handed over the slip of paper. "Tell the Lieutenant I'll be getting back to him shortly."

"Good hunting, Marshal. Wish y' luck, finding your man." They saluted, wheeled, went downstairs.

Pedley closed the door.

The lawyer murmured in awe, "Have to hand it to you, brother Pedley. Within the hour you've turned over two prisoners to the police, secured a confession of murder from another and recovered a quarter-million dollars' worth of stolen property. Must establish a record of some sort; winding up a case that fast."

"Afraid I can't consider it completed until we have a couple more prisoners safely downtown." Pedley paused at the bedroom door. "Miss Tedder."

She gazed at him fearfully. "I'm ready to go."

"How much did you take out of this—" he held up the first-aid box—"in addition to the cash you deposited in the bank?"

"I . . ." she hesitated . . . "I don't remember exactly. It's . . . the rest is down at my office."

Leaning wearily against the jamb of the bedroom door, he turned to the lawyer. "See what I mean? Still a few loose ends to gather in." He signaled to Shaner. "Gather in that one on the bed. Let's get the show on the road."

T W E N T Y - S E V E N

Kay Tedder seized the Marshal's arm. "You don't have to take Rik. He didn't have anything to do with it. The blame is all mine."

Pedley went to the telephone. "We'll have to have your son's statement in addition to anything you may have to say." He asked for the Bureau's number.

The lawyer said, "I'm not in a position to act as your attorney, Miss Tedder. But I do have to tell you that you should be very careful about any admissions you make now, in front of witnesses. Better say nothing at all until you have counsel to advise you."

Shaner tried to get the boy to stand up; he was a life-size rag doll. "Kid's still out cold."

"Hold it one minute," Pedley said, "until I talk to Barney . . . Hi, Barney?"

"Still at the Varamista, boss?"

"Set to leave right away."

"Yuh, well, I finished typing out the Fassler babe's deposition. She claims Nat Pendiff isn't the kind of guy ever to put up a buck unless he's sure he's going to get back two for it, so she's sure he must have the proceeds of the bank robbery, else why would he have risked ten thousand on that reward offer?"

"She's off the beam on that. I have the loot under my arm right now, in an old first-aid kit container."

"No kidding! Have you got the firebug, too?"

"Think we have, Barno. Ed and I are bringing down the whole kit and kaboodle, in case the Commissioner is in a swivet."

"You'll take him off a hot spot, boss. Any chore for me, at this end?"

"Break out the Benzedrine, is all. See you." As he hung up, he glanced at Rik Stavro; the boy's eyes were open but the pupils hardly showed for the whites of the eyeballs. "I'll get a cold towel, Ed. Miss Tedder, you'd better sling on a coat; you'll not be wearing that mink downtown."

In the bathroom he let the cold water run in the shower, doused his head under it, heedless of the dripping on his shirt and coat. He dried his face, sloshed the towel under the spray, shut off the water.

Pendiff was helping Kay into a cashmere topper a couple of minutes later when the Marshal laid the damp towel on Rik's face.

Ed said, "Want me to take the evidence, coach?"

"I'll take the fur and the gloves and the box. You handle the boy and Miss Tedder."

The lawyer said, "I assume you won't require me to make a sworn statement, since you have the case all wrapped up."

"You," said Pedley, "are one of those loose ends I just mentioned. You come right along with the others. All set?"

Rik came to his feet groggily. Ed marched him into the hall. Pendiff took Miss Tedder's arm; she seemed as unsteady as her son. Pedley shut the corridor door behind him.

They filled the small elevator to capacity by the time the Marshal had squeezed in and faced the door.

Rik tried to take a punch at his mother in the close quarters. Ed blocked the blow, stamped on the boy's instep

and—as Rik doubled over—brought up a light uppercut to the Stavro chin.

“If you want to get downtown all in one piece, young fella,” the deputy growled, “you quiet down.”

The door slid open onto the lobby. They filed out.

Halfway to the door the night switchboard man called, “Hey, Marshal . . .”

Pedley said, “Yair, Joe?”

“Your office, calling you back. You can take it here at the board.”

“All right.” He shifted the mink stole and the first-aid box to his right arm, stalked stiffly to the switchboard.

Joe Howland said, sotto voce, “Put the box down, Marshal.” He shifted the newspaper he had been reading so the blued muzzle of the .45 showed slightly. “Just set it down, easy like, no commotion; that’s the idea.”

Pedley put the first-aid tin on the switchboard shelf.

“Now, turn around. Go back to the others. Don’t bother to peek over your shoulder unless you want a slug in the spine. An’ if that bull-neck deputy of yours starts anything, you get it first, understand?”

Now, if your reflexes were even at fifty per cent of normal, you might take this guy. But you can’t do it when you’re practically out on your feet. Pedley swung around on his heel, sauntered toward the group which had halted for him to complete his phone call.

Ed Shaner squinted at Joe in disbelief. “Hey!” he began. “What goes on . . . ?”

Pedley cautioned: “Easy does it.”

But Rik was beyond control; he saw the night man pick up the box, come to his feet, start backing toward the front door, facing the group in the middle of the lobby and swinging the automatic in a threatening arc.

"He's taking Pop's box!" Rik yelled. "You're not going to let him get away with that!"

"Steady," warned the Marshal. "Stay put."

But the boy dashed for Joe Howland. "Why, you *bastard!* Come back here with that money!"

The .45 roared. Chips from the tessellated floor stung the Marshal's face.

Rik ran on, crazily.

Kay screamed: "Joe! For God's sake, *don't!* DON'T!!" She flew after her son. "Rikky! Stop!!"

Pendiff sprawled flat on the floor.

Shaner was down on one knee, his gun leveled, but he couldn't get a shot at the night man without the risk of hitting the woman.

Joe reached the street door. "Keep away!" he shouted, aiming point-blank at the onrushing boy.

Rik dived in an attempt to tackle, but his momentum wasn't sufficient. He lay spread-eagled on the floor at Joe's feet, clutching the night man's legs.

The gun angled downward. Kay Tedder flung herself at the gun a split second before it exploded. She put a hand to her breast, sank gently to her knees, collapsed.

Joe fled into the darkness.

Ed Shaner tore after him. Pedley hurried to the switchboard.

Rik sat up, bawling. "Mom!" He wrapped an arm around her. "Did he shoot you . . . ?"

"I've had it, Rikky," she whispered.

"Aw, Mom. Don't say that. We'll get a doc for you!"

"I've had it, darling. And . . . it's all right."

"You know what, Mom? That bastard would have killed me if you hadn't jumped in when you did. *You saved my life!*"

"I've been trying . . . to do that . . . for years,

Rikky." She smiled at him. "And if I've finally succeeded . . ." She was silent.

Pendiff came to the switchboard as the Marshal finished with his emergency call for the ambulance.

"That switchboard man must have gone berserk to try to stage a stickup like that, Marshal."

Pedley watched the boy's paroxysm of weeping over the dead woman. "Joe knew it was all or nothing for him—he figured he might as well try for winner-take-all."

"He got away with it," the lawyer said.

"No." Pedley pointed. "No, he didn't. They've got him."

Shaner and the two laddermen from Fifty-eight wrestled a battered Joe Howland into the lobby from the street.

T W E N T Y - E I G H T

Shaner held the .45 in his left hand, the tin box in his right. His brick-red face was dark with anger. "I wanted to plug this creep but the boys had him down in the gutter, were giving him a going-over time I got out there."

One fireman fingered a swollen lip. "That receipt you gave us was a puzzler, Marshal."

Pedley stared morosely at the prisoner. "Things didn't work out way I'd planned. I'd hoped to bypass the gunplay. No need of it . . . but the boy wouldn't listen to me. If we could have let Joe think he was getting away scot-free, there wouldn't have been any shooting. He'd have run out; you'd have collared him; that would have been that."

"Receipt?" Shaner scowled. "What receipt?"

The other fireman held out the slip which had come from Swisher. On its back, Pedley had scribbled:

*Stick around outside bldg. Keep out of
sight until switchboard man lams out,
grab same.*

Pendiff asked, "You've been suspicious of this operator right along?"

"My business to be suspicious," Pedley said. "Disagreeable business. Kind of sours you on human nature, sometimes. But at least we have the firebug."

The first fireman showed his teeth in a tight grin. "I'll feel better about going to Pete's funeral, now."

"One thing to nab the bug," said his mate, "another to convict him."

"He's convicted himself," Pedley answered. "But we want him to take the rap on the arson charge, not murder. Tell you what. Cops'll be here in a minute. Think you can get him around to your firehouse, hold him there for me?"

Both laddermen smiled. "If he tries to get away from us, you'll have to send for the street sweeper to put him together again."

Joe Howland cringed. "I got a right to be arrested legally, not shanghaied somewheres so these damn firemen can lynch me!"

"Whatever happens to you," retorted the Marshal, "will be too good for you. Run him out, boys. Tell the Lieutenant I'll come get him."

When Joe had been led away, Shaner went over to Rik who knelt by his mother's body in a state of shock. Ed stooped, put his arm around the boy's shoulder, pulled the youth to his feet, made him sit on one of the concrete benches flanking the elevator.

Pendiff said, beneath his breath, "Why did she do that, Marshal?"

"Sacrifice herself? She told him why. She'd been trying to save the kid from himself for years. Now it's possible she may have touched his conscience. In any case, she wouldn't have had much to live for. I'd say she really loved Joe Howland. You certainly must have figured she had some extramarital romance, aside from Alex Stavro."

"Well, yes. But I had no notion the man in the case might be an ordinary employee in her apartment building."

"But you did think there was a good reason why she'd never gone through with her suit against Stavro for separate maintenance."

"True."

"It could hardly have been anything except her fear that

her husband might have private detectives investigate and learn that the night switchboard operator was slipping into her apartment at odd hours of the day or night, whenever the boy was out or supposed to be asleep."

"The boy did mention that his mother was drippy, I believe he called it, about the dayside man."

"Expect that was to keep him from thinking too much about her attitude toward the night man."

A siren whined to a descending coyote wail. Plain-clothesmen hurried in. They examined the body perfunctorily.

"Who shot her, Marshal?"

"The kid over there?"

"He's her son," Pedley answered. "She died, saving him from a murderous maniac."

The detective's chin thrust out. "You sent in a descrip?"

"You won't need one. Name is Joseph Howland. He's the night operator at the Varamista switchboard. Also, he's the torch who touched off that Little Italy fire this morning."

The plain-clothesman's partner inquired, "How'd he get away from you?"

"He didn't," said Pedley, mildly. "We have him under arrest, now."

The plain-clothesmen exchanged glances. "Seems to me," one remarked sourly, "I've been hearing about the Fire Department tryin' to take over police powers—"

"We have enough to do, tending to our own business."

The Marshal was unruffled. "This man Howland was our business. He was a firebug first, a killer second. If he doesn't get the chair for arson, you'll be welcome to try him on the homicide charge."

"Yeah, yeah. Mind if we sit in on the switchboard, few minutes?"

"Help yourself."

The lawyer was curious. "Marshal, do you mean to

suggest that the affair between Joe and my client's wife had been going on for some time?"

"Can't say. Joe probably started out by being sympathetic with her where her son was concerned. There'd have been enough chances for the sympathetic approach from that angle."

"I suppose the night switchboard man would have plenty of opportunity to render special services," suggested Pendiff. "Running errands—pills from the drugstore, a bottle of liquor from the package store. And one thing would naturally lead to another . . ."

"Thing to remember is that Joe could listen in on all the phone calls to and from her apartment while he was on the board."

"He'd know all about her business."

"And about her son's. Likely that's how he learned that Mamma Carlotta had the bank loot hidden somewhere in her tenement," Pedley said.

A gong clanged. The officer at the switchboard said, "Amby's here. Call y' back."

Two young men in starchy white jackets brought a stretcher, made a momentary examination, filled in required forms. There was a hushed conference with the plain-clothesmen. One of the interns returned to the ambulance, came back with a hypodermic.

Rik was too numb to protest the needle. The intern patted him reassuringly. The boy watched the removal of his mother's body with the apathy of a sleepwalker. When one detective, armed with notebook and pencil, began to ask questions, Rik refused to answer.

Shaner joined Pendiff and the Marshal. "Half an hour ago the kid was positive his mother tortured the old woman to death. Now he's ready to go to hell to prove she didn't. Was he right before, or is he right now, coach?"

"Now, Ed. She didn't have anything to do with the tor-

ture or the torching. That semi-confession was to protect Joe long enough for him to get clear . . . only he was too greedy to use the escape-hole she'd fixed for him. He'd learned about the cache at Mamma Carlotta's by eavesdropping on the Tedder phone—the boy would have called his aunt or his father's mistress or maybe he tried to talk to his father at the Saracen about Mamma Carlotta."

"But, coach, if he was on the switchboard all night—"

"He was supposed to have been, but he wasn't. Maybe that's what made her begin to worry about whether he'd been over there or not. See, she knew Joe wanted to get his hands on some big money. She knew he wanted to get it to bail her out of the bankruptcy proceedings which were hanging over her head. And while Joe might not have taken the gamble just for himself, he was willing to risk it for the woman who let him crawl into her bed now and then."

"Hah!" Shaner opened the box, examined the contents. "What kind of rodent is it that wouldn't mind throttling an old lady to death and setting fire to her place, just to help out a dame who lets him sleep with her!"

"That's the way it was," Pedley said. "Because, after he dug the box out from behind that medicine cabinet and brought it back to the Varamista, he took out twenty thousand dollars, half for himself and half for her. He'd promised to get hold of enough cash to keep the bank from foreclosing on her business property; she, in turn, had guaranteed the bank that she would come up with the money within the next couple of days."

Pendiff asked, "How could he have dared to leave the switchboard unattended long enough to go over to Mamma Carlotta's and—go through that ugly business with the cigar tip? Wouldn't he be afraid of being found out?"

"Not many residential calls," the Marshal said, "come through an apartment-house board in the middle of the night. Anyone calling in from outside and not being able

to get through would assume the board was closed for the night. Thing was, when Joe called Kay on his return, to say he had the money he'd promised to get for her, she began to worry about the possibility that he'd gone to her mother-in-law's. Finally I suppose she fretted about it so much she had to go over to see for herself."

Shaner said, "Joe used her car to drive over there?"

"And parked it around the block, yair. When he drove it back, he didn't take the time to run it over to the garage, so it was still out in front of the Varamista when she wanted to use it. She went over and up to Mamma Carlotta's. The door to her rooms would have been open and the place would have been full of smoke. Hard to say whether Joe deliberately set the mattress afire or whether the cigar he'd been using dropped on the bed and smoldered until it burst into flame. Anyhow, Kay Tedder would have seen the wrecked medicine cabinet and the hole in the wall; she knew Joe had been there. All she could do then, to set things right, was to hurry away and phone in the alarm."

Shaner said, "And then she was trapped. She'd started to cover up for him; she had to keep on. Even to being willing to make that phony confession. But you had her taped all the time, coach."

"Not quite, Ed. *No*. But there were a couple of things."

"Marshal," said one of the detectives, "we're taking the boy around to the precinct."

"Well, well." Pedley was amazed. "What charge will you book him on?"

"We'll hold him on an open charge until we've looked into this business a whole lot more thoroughly. Few things about it we still don't quite understand."

"Let me put in one call first," said Pedley, "and I'll see if I can come up with some of the answers. We're always glad to be of help to the police."

T W E N T Y - N I N E

"Commissioner? Chief Fire Marshal speaking."

"Well, hello, Ben. Didn't expect to hear from you before midnight."

"If then, hah?"

"Ah, now, Ben. You know I have the greatest confidence in you, personally, and in the way you've been running the Bureau. But you have to realize the Fire Department is just like an old hose—it can only stand so much pressure."

"Maybe I can relieve it some."

"Have you made an arrest?"

"Several. Starting with this Alexander Stavro."

"He was responsible for the Little Italy blaze?"

"Might say so, though he didn't set it. Whole case centered on him. He and a crook by the name of Frank Kolz robbed a bank in Louisville of a quarter-million dollars in cash and negotiable securities."

"That was a hell of a haul."

"Heavy enough to cause a lot of friction, Commissioner. Stavro was holding the money until they could split the swag and get out of the country. Interpol grabbed Stavro. You following this?"

"Every syllable, Ben."

"So when Kolz found out his partner was being held, he was afraid Stavro'd cross him up by making a trade with the prosecutor's office; he gave Stavro's sister a twenty-four-hour ultimatum . . . give him his share or take the consequences."

"Said consequences being the burning of the tenement?"

"Indirectly, that was one of them. Stavro'd gotten his mother to stash the loot somewhere in her rooms; she wasn't to tell anyone where it had been hidden. No one except her son, that is. But when the time came, she wouldn't turn it over. He sent his sister to plead with his mother. He sent his son. He went there himself. No dice. She wouldn't give."

"So *he* torched her place?"

"No. We wouldn't have had so much trouble if it had been that simple, Commissioner. And we did run into quite a mite of trouble. The way of the transgressor is littered with casualties."

"Pete Arnette and Larry Foster."

"Our boys, yair. Also Stavro's sister; she's in the hospital recovering from a bullet wound. His wife and mother are in the morgue."

"Good Lord, Ben. But you did arrest the man himself?"

"I did . . . and I turned him over to the police along with his notorious partner, Frankie the Actor Kolz."

"That ought to take some of the sting out of the accusation that we've been overstepping ourselves and trying to take over police functions."

"We also handed Stavro's son over to them, just a few minutes ago."

"The boy who got away from you at the fire scene?"

"That's right. And Stavro's Interpol guard is in the lockup at the Forty-seventh Street station."

"I'd like to hear somebody make a crack about lack of cooperation, *now!*"

"Local papers please copy, Commissioner."

"I'm damn well going to see to it that they do, Ben. I'll bear down on the fine job the Bureau's done."

"While you're at it, pass out a few pats on the back to

the boys of Pete and Larry's company; Swisher's outfit was a big factor in recovering the loot."

"*You have the missing quarter-million?!*"

"It's under my elbow right now."

"Fine, Ben. Splendid. Can you bring it to my office?"

"It'll be on my desk at the Bureau in an hour, Commissioner, 'case the newspaper boys want to get some photographs. I don't want to release it until we've examined the contents thoroughly."

"All right, that's reasonable. But Ben . . . ?"

"Yair?"

"If you've turned over all these prisoners to the police, where does it leave the Fire Department? We're entitled to some share of the credit."

"We'll get it. We have Stavro's mistress and his lawyer, both material witnesses."

"Ben!"

"What, Commissioner?"

"*What about the firebug?*"

"Oh, we have him over at Ladder Fifty-eight."

"Which one of these people is he?"

"He's not. His name is Joseph Howland. He's the night switchboard operator at Mrs. Stavro's apartment on Central Park West."

"A *telephone* operator?"

"Also—and not at all incidentally—he was the joy-friend of Alex Stavro's wife."

"How can I announce this to the newspapers with nothing more than what you've told me, to go on? *Why did he set the blaze, Ben?*"

"Joe was in a listening post position, Commissioner. He wasn't supposed to tap in on the tenants' phone calls, but he did. He overheard talk between Stavro's son and Stavro's sister, probably caught a few crucial calls to Stavro's

mother. He learned that the money'd been hidden somewhere over at Stavro's mother's place."

"Was the wife in on this double-crossing deal?"

"Not intentionally, Commissioner. She ran an interior decorating business that was going bust; she needed cash fast to keep from going under; she'd told her joy-friend about that. She didn't put him up to making a try for her husband's quarter-million and I doubt if she would have gone along with the idea if Joe had suggested it to her. But after he'd gone over to Little Italy and tried to get the old lady to reveal the hiding place of the swag, failing in that until he burned her arm with a lighted cigar and had to choke her to silence her howls of agony—after he'd come back to Varamista with the dough, he turned over ten thousand bucks in thousand-dollar bills. Not being a complete ninny, she knew where that money'd come from."

"So she was an accomplice—after the fact?"

"Sure, legally. Maybe not morally. She drove over to Mamma Carlotta's to find out if her suspicions were correct. The cigar Joe'd left burning had sparked the mattress and bedding under the old lady's body; the tenement was burning. She ran out, drove away, phoned in the alarm—and spent the day sweating out her guilty knowledge."

"Did you say she was dead?"

"Joe shot her. In the lobby of her apartment building. He was aiming at her son, but she smothered the shot with her breast. Saved the boy. We got Joe . . . but it was my error."

"You call a roundup like this an *error*, Ben?"

"Yair. It was. I thought we probably could connect Joe with the boxful of cash and securities because he'd hidden it in a toilet in the rooming house where he slept when he wasn't in her bed. But I had nothing to place him at the arson scene. I wanted to get him to commit himself. I'd fixed

it so he could overhear my call to the Bureau, telling Barney Malloy that I was bringing down the box of goodies. I'd figured on his taking the loot away from me, which he did. But I overlooked the crazy kid who couldn't stand the idea of anyone getting away with the money he thought was going to keep his father from getting a life sentence. The boy went after Joe. She interfered. Joe killed her."

The Commissioner was silent for a moment. "Terrific, Ben. I want to get to the newspapers as quickly as possible. How soon can you be at my office?"

"I have something to attend to first, Commissioner."

"But Ben, this is *important*—"

"So's the matter I have to attend to, Commissioner. I'll call you as soon as I've finished."

THIRTY

There were no cut flowers perfuming the men's ward at the hospital; the fragrance of ether and iodoform surrounded Russ Drake's cot like a pall of smoke. Night nurses padded softly about the half-darkened room; the conversation at the deputy's bedside was in undertones.

Ed Shaner, his chair tilted back on its hind legs, his necktie loosened, his collar unbuttoned, regarded the Marshal, sitting on the other side of Russ Drake's cot, in the manner of a small boy getting his first close-up view of an All-American quarterback.

Russ Drake, his cast-bound leg suspended in a traction sling, inquired softly, "Only piece I can't fit into place is this Frankie the Actor; how did he happen to decide Larry Foster had the Stavro cache on him?"

Pedley rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Haven't had time to question Kolz yet. But I think it'll turn out he was over at Helen Stavro's apartment house when I went over there to collar the boy. Kolz knew all about Stavro's sister, naturally. He'd telephoned his either-or-else message to her, being sure she'd get it through to her brother. If he'd been skulking around outside the building when I went in, he'd likely have recognized Ed's Buick as a Bureau car. It wouldn't have been hard for him to trail me down to Ladder Fifty-eight—and once there, it wouldn't have taken him long to discover that Pete Arnette was a member of that company."

Shaner said, "Hang around a firehouse ten minutes and keep your ears open, you can learn all you want about the last worker the rig rolled to. Wouldn't have been difficult for Kolz to find out all about the fire and Pete's death and Larry's rescue of Pete."

"Still . . ." Russ didn't get it.

Pedley went on, "Kolz didn't simply hang around; he went *in* the firehouse, posing as an old friend of Pete's."

"Now I begin to catch." Russ nodded.

"Yair. Kolz spoke to Larry for some time, evidently concluded that since Larry and Pete had been the only firemen in Mamma Carlotta's rooms, one or the other of them must have that precious box."

"Then Lieutenant Swisher told Larry to take sick leave," said Shaner.

"Which gave Kolz the chance he'd been looking for." Pedley stifled a yawn. "Wouldn't have been hard to follow Larry into that alley, sneak up behind him, clobber him senseless and search the body for those bonds and thousand-buck bills."

Russ asked, "What good would the stuff have done Kolz? You don't just walk in a bar and lay down a thousand-dollar bill and ask for change."

"Yeah," Shaner chimed in. "Besides, every cashier in the country would have the serial numbers of those bills. No bank or bond house would dare to touch those liquor securities."

"You forget that Alex Stavro had important connections abroad," Pedley answered. "If that pair had managed to get to Europe or South America with that tin trayful of stolen property they'd have found a way to convert it into spending cash, all right."

Shaner brought his chair to floor level. "Coach . . . did you have this Joe character spotted at the time you told me to take over from him at the switchboard, this morning?"

"Hell, no, Ed. My first inkling that Howland might have played a part in the Little Italy business came when the day man, Danahey, told me he sometimes garaged Miss Tedder's car for her. Seemed reasonable to suppose that if the switchboard man on the dayside could perform a small service for her, maybe the night man had done as much."

"Or more," Russ said.

Shaner turned his head from left to right, slowly, and back again. "That didn't clue you to the location of the loot."

"Her address book did that," the Marshal answered. "She had a cryptic word in the back of the little book in which she listed phone numbers she used frequently. *Cohabet*."

"What?" Russ cocked his head in disbelief.

"*Cohabet*. Lots of people who can't remember numbers use instead a word the numbers spell out on the phone dial. This one worked out to a Columbus number belonging to a tobacco store on Amsterdam."

"Why," Shaner wanted to know, "would a dame living in a ritzy establishment like the Varamista be calling a tobacco store?"

"That's what I went over there to find out," Pedley said. "All I could find in the pay booth were a lot of the cryptic doodlings written on the paneling by people waiting to get a call through, or by someone who'd taken a message for somebody else. In this case the message-taker was the proprietor, who used a kind of blackboard shorthand he'd learned at a bar down in the Village. Among the other memos was one that looked like this." He unclipped the chart from the foot of the cot, turned it over, scrawled on the back

HAV JOK

Russ Drake looked at it blankly.

Shaner scratched his head. "J? Might stand for Joe, hah?"

"And K for Kay Tedder," Pedley agreed.

"But what's the O?" asked Russ.

"Way I figured it," the Marshal explained, "it was meant to represent a ring. J ring K. Have Joe ring Kay."

"You doped that out," Shaner marveled, "after you'd been without sleep for thirty-odd hours?"

Pedley said, "I couldn't think of any other J who Kay Tedder might want to get in touch with, surreptitiously, so to speak."

"Such high-flown language," Russ said. "I follow you, so far, but how did you locate Joe's hideout, with nothing more than a pay-phone doodle to go on?"

"If Joe was getting messages via that tobacco store, he'd have to live right close by. In a place that didn't have any phone. Only such was that broken-down rooming house."

"You make it all sound very simple, coach," Shaner said. "The Commissioner ought to rate you a special citation for this job."

"Citation, my eye," said Pedley drowsily. "I don't want any citation. All I want is about . . . ten hours . . . of uninterrupted . . ."

The sentence was finished with a gentle snore.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEWART STERLING began his career as a fiction writer some twenty years ago in the first issues of *Black Mask*. Since then he has published some four hundred detective short stories in virtually every mystery magazine in the field. Fire Marshal Ben Pedley, protagonist of forty of these stories as well as nine novels by Sterling, is modeled after the late, great Tom Brophy, Chief Fire Marshal of New York City.

Born in Evanston, Illinois, and now a resident of Ormond Beach, Florida, Mr. Sterling has lived in seven other states and spent seven years cruising the East Coast of the United States in the fifty-foot *EllGee*. Educated at Worcester's Highland Military Academy and at Dartmouth College, he has done newspaper work for the *Boston Post*, *Worcester Telegram* and *New York Herald Tribune*. He has edited various trade and business publications and lectured in journalism at Columbia and New York universities.

Mr. Sterling's writing credits include articles, mainly on criminal techniques and investigations, for numerous magazines. During the thirties he wrote and produced over five hundred half-hour network mystery shows for radio; he has written for motion pictures and for television.

Stewart Sterling numbers among his likes Chesapeake crabs, Kentucky horse racing, Florida beaches, California mountains, chess, Stravinsky, duplicate bridge and dogs. His dislikes include wild-card poker, pre-sliced bread, rock 'n roll, most abstract impressionism, pink cocktails and big parties.

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